



## The Media in the Times of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

Nuhu Diraso Gapsiso<sup>1\*</sup>, Hajara Ibrahim Garba<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>University of Maiduguri, Borno, Nigeria

### Abstract

*The media became a strong driver of either reliable information or misinformation. The trends of issues during the pandemic indicate that media has been targeted by global health authorities, national governments, and health agencies, among other developmental vital stakeholders, in mobilizing the public at all levels to communicate the preventive measures, symptoms, and non-surgical and hygiene practices that would help in stemming the spread of the virus. The paper indicates that knowledge plays a significant role in driving public health practices. Another critical role the media plays in influencing public perception, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors during the peak of the public health emergency. Media also performed the responsibility of being the watchdog of society through consistent follow-ups on contact tracing, daily broadcasts of the infected, recoveries, and fatalities in different countries across the globe, including Nigeria. The paper recommends that the media should be more watchful in the information they disseminate to the public to avoid jeopardizing the primary aim of reducing people's uncertainty. This can be done by controlling information overload by deploying more instruments of gatekeeping to titrate the kinds of information they send through their channels.*

**Keywords:** media, covid-19, pandemic, coronavirus, information

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**\*Corresponding author:** gapsiso@unimaid.edu.ng

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 infection in China and its subsequent spread as a pandemic, the virus has caused public unrest and forced people to seek information about the virus and the pandemic in the most accessible ways available to them (Shah et al., 2020). The readily available means of getting such information is the mass media comprising the broadcast media, the print media, the internet, and any other channel through which a sizeable heterogeneous audience is reached with information. The information could be on the environment, governance, education, or public health emergencies like COVID-19, during which the audience needs to stay informed and enlightened about the outbreak (World Health Organisation, WHO, 2020).

To provide information about the virus, different entities ventured with different motives. While the government is mounting efforts to subdue and flatten the curve, other elements embarked on creating more scare through fake news, misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and conspiracy theories (WHO, 2020). As a result, the world is currently experiencing a saturation of information mass media circle that has never been experienced before due to the emergence of the internet, thereby increasing the impact and reach of the mass media on its audience (Basch et al., 2020).

Consequently, the media became a strong driver of reliable information or misinformation. The trends of issues during the pandemic indicate that media has been targeted by global health authorities, national governments, and health agencies, among other developmental key stakeholders, in mobilizing the public at all levels to communicate the preventive measures, symptoms, and non-surgical and hygiene practices that would help in stemming the spread of the virus (Dobkin, 1992; World Health Organisation, WHO, 2020a; the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO, 2020). Also, healthcare experts of international repute delved into providing insight into the contagiousness of the virus, its effects, symptoms, and preventive measures, according to Jadoo (2020:278).

“Many countries have decided to control the pandemic by implementing social distancing, quarantine, closing malls, shops, masjids, schools, universities, and jointly teaching medical care to people how to behave to prevent the adverse effects of coronavirus.”

In Nigeria, the Federal Government of Nigeria constituted the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 (PTF-COVID-19) to coordinate the country’s response. State governments also followed the track of the Federal Government by establishing State Task Forces (STFs) to work together with the PTF. Central to the response is the involvement of the media. The media has been incorporated at different levels, creating awareness, mobilization, coverage, enlightenment, watchdog, and surveillance. Social media was also used by the WHO, ACDC, PTF, NCDC, and Ministry of Health to communicate the pandemic control efforts to the public. This paper is concerned with the media’s role and impact during the pandemic, focusing on information, enlightenment, awareness, mobilization, and watchdog (Akinfeleye, 2011; Shah et al, 2020).

The mass media performs the role of informing, educating, and entertaining people in society. However, circumstances such as insecurity, conflict, and public health emergencies like COVID-19 tend to sway their focus on some of their responsibilities more than others depending on what society needs at a particular time. Due to the devastating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on global health, politics, education, the economy, and the totality of human lives, the media was observed to have shifted focus to creating awareness, watchdog, mobilization, and influencing behaviors and practices. Having established this, the role performed by the mass media is reflected in how people change or sustain their practices during the emergency. However, the positive impact of the mass media on people entails compliance with the preventive measures, while the negative impacts of the mass media on its audience dictates otherwise. It is also important to note here that the media’s ability to impact knowledge on the audience through routine communication is one thing, and the ability to change their behavior through such communication is another thing. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the roles mass media played during the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on the Nigerian experience.

There are two objectives of this paper, namely first, examining the roles of the mass media during the COVID-19 pandemic and, second, identifying the impact

of the mass media during the covid-19 pandemic. Then conceptual clarification *COVID-19* is the code name for the Coronavirus Virus Disease that broke and spread from China and caused one of the biggest pandemics in world history. CO stands for Corona, VI stands for Virus, D stands for Disease, and 19 stands for the year the outbreak started 2019. It has killed many people economies of the world suffered greatly due to measures imposed to tame its deadly spread. *The media* refers to the conventional mediums of mass communication, which include radio, television, newspaper, and magazine. Put them together, this paper refers to them as mass media – communication mediums to heterogeneous audiences. *A pandemic* is an outbreak that has spread beyond one country, nation, state, or continent, such as the Coronavirus pandemic. *Public Health Emergency* refers to the distress caused by a natural disaster, artificial manipulations, or disease outbreak. It is a situation when the attention of governments, media, and the public turns to healthcare organizations, institutions, and experts to salvage the situation. Such a situation requires measures – some of which are far-reaching.

The literature review in this paper is that media as a concept and as a variable has been explained as an instrument for changing behavior (Akinfeleye, 2011). Through routine communication, the media creates a network of readers who, over time, depend on such media for information about their daily lives. Such had happened during insecurity and terrorism in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Nigeria, where the Boko Haram insurgency still rages on; during epidemics like the Ebola outbreak, Lassa fever, endemic like HIV; during elections like the US election between Clinton and Trump and in Nigeria between Buhari and Atiku. There is strong evidence to suggest that the media pattern of information is highly influenced by the situation of the society within which it operates. In this review, the paper looked at some research that has worked on the role of the media in society and health emergencies like COVID-19.

Roles of the media in society. The media have roles to play in countries' national security (Ali, 2013). His study on the role of the media in National Security in Nigeria from 1960 to 1999 posits that Nigerian mass media, since independence, has faced the greatest challenge of how to make itself relevant to Nigerian society. This is because the elite and political class have deployed the media as tools for selfish interests which, as a result, made the media become an instrument for

causing tension among the civilian population. Similarly, submit there is a strong correlation between the mass media and the insecurity in Nigeria. They emphasized that the media has practical measures to combat insecurity in societies like Nigeria (Nwabueze and Ebeze, 2013).

Apart from national security involvement, the media is also an active political player. The media also impacted political proceedings such as campaigns and elections at national and global levels (Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, and Vreese, 2012). They stated that the 2008 U.S. Presidential election was a worldwide event that gained significant public and media attention well beyond the borders of the United States.

Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, and Vreese (2012) pointed out that “media favorability increases positive evaluations of McCain while being exposed to the campaign, in general, contributed to more favorable assessments of Obama.”

They also pointed out that there was overwhelmingly stable and positive coverage of Obama in international media. This finding points to the fact that the media is an active player in the political process and can influence decisions.

In corroboration with the position about the role of the media in elections (Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, and Vreese, 2012). They also found that the media influence electoral outcomes through political advertisement, reportage, and coverage, even though they are not the sole determinants of electoral outcomes in Nigeria (Omali, 2021). A better explanation of how the media influence electoral outcomes found that exposure to television advertising influences voters’ preference for advertised candidates (Edegoh, Ezebuenyi, and Asemah, 2013). Television advertising also triggers quicker recall of advertised candidates in voters.

Media during public health emergencies. Several scholars identified the key roles media play in public health emergencies. According to Odorume (2015), media plays significant roles as a subsystem in influencing perception, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of public and government policy on many issues, including public health emergencies (Pan American Health Organisation, PAHO, 2020). In addition to this position, the WHO (2005) puts that the essentiality of media in public health emergencies is enormous. The WHO added that such enormous roles are recognized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Odorume (2015) further stated that the role of

the media during public health emergencies transcended information, education, and enlightenment but expected to deal with campaigns toward sustainable health; building, maintaining, and restoring trust; improving knowledge and understanding; guiding and encouraging appropriate attitudes, decisions, actions, and behaviors; and encouraging collaboration and cooperation; provide information and advice to victims; and directing the public to additional sources of information (WHO, 2005; CDC, 2014; Odorume, 2015). In their submission, Uwom and Oloyede (2014) reported that newspapers gave high frequency and prominence to HIV/AIDS public health issues. The study was conducted when HIV/AIDS was a public health emergency. Then also established a connection between media and public health emergencies. Their studies focus on Ebola and Lassa fever (Smith and Smith, 2016; Wogu et al., 2019).

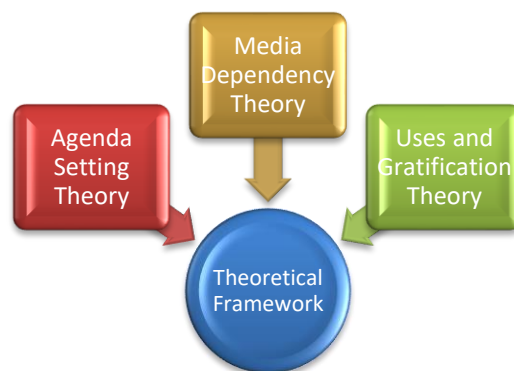
Oyama and Okpara (2017) posit that as a watchdog of society, the media sets the public agenda on several matters, including health matters, especially during emergencies. Some of the roles they identified are that media informs, educates, and entertains the public, on public health emergencies and serves as a forum for discourses related to public health. Olubunmi, Ofurum, and Tob (2016), who examined public health communication strategies in Nigeria, argued that the efficacy of public health messages in media depends on the effectiveness of the broad communication strategy deployed. Media, especially radio, was effective in reaching a larger audience but less effective in enforcing behavioral changes. Concerning the media instrumentality in the delivery of health communication information, Olubunmi, Ofurum, and Tob (2016) found that television was instrumental in reaching teenagers and adolescents, and radio seems to be the most operational broadcast option in reaching out to rural Nigeria besides other interpersonal communication channels. This points to the fact that the media could significantly influence the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper explores this aspect of media roles during the pandemic in Nigeria.

Media roles during the Covid-19 pandemic. Several studies conducted revealed variations in knowledge, attitude, practices, and general compliance with the preventive measures (Iqbal & Younas, 2021; Shah et al., 2020; Jadoo et al., 2020; Mehmet, 2020; Dardas et al., 2020; Alrasheedy, Abdulsalim, Farooqui, Alsaahli, & Godman, 2020; Akomoneh, 2020). The results are different among the

different groups of the population. Jadoo et al. (2020) found that the level of knowledge, attitude, and practice of the Syrian people resident in Turkey towards COVID-19 was good compared to some neighboring countries; studies from China (Zhong et al., 2020) Saudi Arabia (Al-Hanawi et al., 2020) and Nigeria (Reuben, Danladi, Saleh and Ejembi, 2020) indicated there is an adequate level of knowledge towards COVID-19 while Ethiopia revealed contrary result (Akalu, Ayelign and Moll, 2020). These variations depict the levels of performance of the media in such places. The help of mass media and health education programs intended to educate people on COVID-19 awareness are effective in reassuring optimistic attitudes and maintaining safe practices. These findings show that knowledge plays a significant role in driving public health practices. The media provide such knowledge, which is why this focus on the positive and negative performance of the media in providing knowledge about the virus to the audience who depend on them for information.

This paper's Theoretical framework is based on the propositions of Agenda Setting Theory, Media Dependency Theory, and Uses and Gratification Theory to form a theoretical framework.

**Figure 1.**  
**Theoretical Framework**



The agenda-setting argued that the media have the wherewithal to set agenda by emphasizing issues through news reporting, which will consequently make the audience see it as important and attach significance to the issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Agenda setting is achieved through two approaches; frequency of reporting and the prominence of placement of issues. This theory becomes relevant to this paper because the consistent reporting of issues of COVID-19 by the media over time could trigger the public (audience) to attach importance to the pandemic, which will also be reflected in how they react to the

quarantine measures. This paper looks at the agenda-setting process from a positive perspective, a huge diversion from the usual norm of analyzing the theory as negative.

The Media Dependency Theory posits that the media is an entity upon which the audience relies. The audience relies on the media to get informed. This means that the audience relies on the media to reduce uncertainty. In this sense, the media during the COVID-19 pandemic served as the last resort for the audience who have been lockdown down in their houses due to the quarantine measures to provide them with information about the situation of the pandemic. This dependency placed the media in a significant position to influence the audience's knowledge, attitude, decisions, and practices. This theory provides a veritable explanation as to the position of the media in the information chain and the possible role or impact the media can have in the pandemic.

On the other hand, the Uses and Gratification Theory complements the agenda-setting and media dependency to explain why the audience uses or depends on the media. The theory posits that different audiences use the media for different purposes. Whereas some use the media for relaxation, others use the media to reduce uncertainty. The three theories provide a considerably comprehensive explanation from both the media and audience perspective on the relationship between the media effect, media influence, media roles, audience attitude, and audience reactions to the media influence.

## **METHODS**

The study used Library Research Method (LRM), a methodology to review published conceptual and empirical studies. Library Research is a systematic method of searching relevant materials through a keyword search in catalogs, indexes, search engines, and full-text resources. LRM uses both physical and virtual libraries. Using this methodology, a researcher can use keywords to narrow searches to a specific subject area or areas of specialization in a specific subject area. The main target is to access conceptual and empirical evidence sources for analysis. The study used online libraries and platforms that catalog published scholarly works. These include JSTOR, Academia.edu, and Google Scholar. The study population is the total number of published research articles cataloged,



indexed, or merely uploaded on the above platforms that relate, espouse, expound, and analyze the roles of media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the nature of the platforms, there is no reliable record of the total number of articles indexed on COVID-19. The study purposively sampled articles published on the roles of media during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The researcher downloaded the sampled articles and reviewed their findings to analyze them.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Basic Roles of Mass Media in Public Health Emergencies**

The first role of the media during the pandemic has been to provide reliable and up-to-date information. During the COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria, the media was incorporated into the national and state response teams. The mandate of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) included daily media briefings whose frequency was later determined by the exigencies to avail citizens with information on COVID-19 that included increased preparedness concerning various sectors such as testing centers, testing capability, new cases, number of deaths, recovered and discharged cases as well as information about discoveries related to symptoms and vaccine. The briefings were covered by journalists who tried to ensure that issues surrounding the disease were captured in news and other media genres. The news, however, remains the most important content variety though numerous articles were published on newspaper and magazine pages to inform people about the virus. The news coverage of COVID-19 and indeed other public health emergencies is to inform and educate members of the public to make the right decisions that can help in protecting and preserving human lives and property as well as the economic status of individuals and nation-states (Basch et al., 2020).

Another key role played by the media, as opined by Odorume (2015), is influencing the public's perception, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors during the peak of the public health emergency. The role of the media during COVID-19 has been obvious concerning providing health communication campaigns on issues such as preventive measures, nature of spread, contact tracing, hygiene, and other non-surgical measures (Reuben, Danladi, Saleh and Ejembi, 2020). The media mounted the efforts because the virus is new, and many people need to gain adequate knowledge about its contagiousness and effect on human beings. The

media had to take up the challenge and go beyond just informing the people to influence how they conduct their life activities during the quarantine period.

According to Oyama and Okpara (2017), as a watchdog of society, the media sets the public agenda on health matters. It informs, educates, and entertains the public, on public health emergencies and serves as a forum for discourses related to public health. They argued that media, by extension, provide leadership to the community, empower society and educate people about potential health risks, physical education, and health literacy, and persistently advocate for adequate measures to improve public health. In this regard, the media also performed the responsibility of being the watchdog of society through consistent follow-ups on contact tracing, daily broadcasts of the infected, recoveries, and fatalities in different countries across the globe, including Nigeria.

### **Impact of mass media during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Public knowledge and practices from several studies conducted revealed variations in knowledge, attitude, practices, and general compliance with the preventive measures (Iqbal & Younas, 2021; Shah et al., 2020; Jadoo et al., 2020; Mehmet, 2020; Dardas et al., 2020; Alrasheedy, Abdulsalim, Farooqui, Alsaahli, & Godman, 2020; Akomoneh, 2020). The results are different among the different groups of the population. Jadoo et al. (2020) found that the level of knowledge, attitude, and practice of the Syrian people resident in Turkey towards COVID-19 was good compared to some neighboring countries; studies from China (Zhong et al., 2020) Saudi Arabia (Al-Hanawi et al., 2020) and Nigeria (Reuben, Danladi, Saleh and Ejembi, 2020) indicated there is an adequate level of knowledge towards COVID-19 while Ethiopia revealed contrary result (Akalu, Ayelign and Moll, 2020). These variations depict the levels of performance of the media in such places. The mass media, through health education programs, is intended to impact the knowledge of the people maintaining safe practices. These findings show that learning plays a significant role in driving public health practices. The media provide such knowledge to aid in curbing the virus. It is safe to argue here that the press positively impacted passing information, but the influence on people's practices was ineffective.

The COVID-19 period was characterized by what the WHO described as “a period of information abundance,” which the Director General, Tedros Adhanom

Ghebreyesus, said, “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting infodemic.” There was a lot of information available in the media circle. According to Ali (2020), coronavirus has many narratives; at the global, national, and local levels as people try to make sense of the virus and the issues surrounding; the virus, symptoms of the virus, ways of transmission, prevention, and cure. As the main driver of information, the media became saturated with unverifiable claims about the coronavirus by experts and even non-experts. The media impact in this respect is negative because instead of providing trustworthy information to the public, the media ended up causing more confusion. The saturation of information made people skeptical about the information they receive daily. This could not be unconnected with the non-compliance to the quarantine measures. In this regard, the paper verdict that the media impact is negative.

The panic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in misinformation. Inaccurate information, including intentional misinformation and disinformation, has been spread through social media, text messages, and mass media. Nigeria was resistant to such information. Conspiracy theories about the virus have been circulating and have caused mistrust and distrust towards the frontline workers and other responders. Such conspiracy theories have also caused chaos, panic, and confusion because of exaggeration and contradiction. Journalists have been arrested in some countries, such as India, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia, for allegedly spreading fake news about the pandemic. In South Africa, authorities arrested people spreading the news that foreigners were spreading the virus. And in Kenya, a man was arrested after he published false information intending to cause panic (Budoo, 2020). Misinformation about COVID-19 has been propagated by celebrities in Nigeria over social media and reported by the mass media. This is also a reflection of the negative impact of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conspiracy theorists seized the opportunity of the pandemic to spread falsehood and cause a public stir over the media. Such falsehood includes fake news and conspiracy theories. On 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020, BBC reported on the growing number of conspiracy theories and bad health advice regarding COVID-19. Ndinojuo (2020), in a study on 5G, religion, and misconceptions in communication on the pandemic in Nigeria, stressed that some conspiracy theorists had linked the coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria to the 5G wireless facilities. WHO said that “no adverse health effects have been established as being caused by mobile phone use.”

The media reported this dialogue at different levels. Some conspiracy theorists have also claimed that the virus is a bio-weapon accidentally or purposefully leaked from a laboratory (Rincon, 2020). In an interview with BBC China in February 2020, Richard Ebright, an American molecular biologist, refuted several conspiracy theories regarding Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), like bioweapons research, or that the virus was engineered even though he said a laboratory leak origin could not be completely ruled out. All these responses put the media on trial regarding reliable information. As a result, the media confused the people instead of reducing their uncertainty with reliable information.

## **CONCLUSION**

COVID-19 is a global crisis that has spread throughout the world at a dangerously fast pace. Mass media plays a huge role in circulating information, influences public behavior, and can curtail the spread of disease. This paper discussed the roles of the media and its impact during the peak time of the pandemic. Some of the effects are positive, while others are negative. This paper concludes that the media tend to impact situations of distress because people seek information to reduce their uncertainty. It is also the study's conclusion that the agenda-setting proposition tends to be effective because of the nature of the demand for communication during a unique situation – which, if the media seized the opportunity, would sway what people see and talk about. In this regard, the media is a veritable instrument government can use to curb the spread of COVID-19. Recommendations in the paper recommend that the media should be more watchful in the information they disseminate to the public to avoid jeopardising the primary aim of reducing people's uncertainty. This can be done by controlling information overload by deploying more instruments of gatekeeping to titrate the kinds of information they send through their channels. The government should also work closely with the media to exploit the power it wields in mobilizing people to change their behaviors, especially during outbreaks like the Lassa Fever, Ebola Virus, and COVID-19. The media should also improve its reportage of reliable information in order to eliminate the skepticism in the minds of its audience.

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### **About the Author**

Nuhu Diraso Gapsiso, Ph.D., is a lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. His teaching and research interest is in the field of Health Communication, Public Relations, Print Media, New Media, and Journalism. He is a member of the African Council for Communication Education. He is a member of the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Board of Examiners, and the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. He has served as a resource person and facilitator in several workshops in Nigeria. He holds a Ph.D. in Mass Communication.

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