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COVERAGE OF COMMUNICABLE AND NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES IN SELECT NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study compared how Nigerian newspapers covered communicable diseases (CDs) and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) given that the latter are often silent killers that not only have high mortality rates but often lead to chronic conditions characterised by pain, disability and huge financial burdens. The study also examined the prominence and interpretativeness of the stories on the diseases. The study was a content analysis of four purposively chosen national newspapers from Jane 2017 to December 2020. The sample was chosen through the constructed and continuous weeks method and consisted of 224 editions. The sample yielded 190 relevant stories and the data were analysed with descriptive statistics, namely, frequencies, percentages and ratios. The findings indicated, inter alia, that the newspapers wrote more reports on CDs than NCDs but their overall reports about diseases were couched in the straight news form and were not interpretative. The study recommended, among other things, that the press should set beneficial agenda through its health reports to help people learn how to escape and control sickness. Such agenda would also drive policies and programmes that positively affect people's health.

Key words: Coverage, Newspapers, Press, Communicable Disease, Non-communicable disease

Background of the Study

The maxim, "health is wealth," is more than a catchy, alliterative saying. Without health, there can be neither individual nor national well being and prosperity.

Only healthy people can be productive, only they can build wealth and develop their communities and nations (Bello, 2015). Aryee (2014), in Sokey *et al*. (2018), states that diverse preventable and non-preventable diseases compounded by poor health care services pose a major threat to human, social and economic advancement in developing countries. It is, therefore, necessary for government to focus on health and execute policies that meet the health needs of its people.

Health implies more than soundness of a person's body but a stable and functional mind that equips that person to meaningfully interact with people as well as other animate and inanimate objects he or she encounters. Good health and proper health care are essential for society to operate optimally (Naveena, 2015). In the absence of health, diseases abound control of which require awareness and knowledge of their causes, symptoms, means of preventing them and possible cures. Yet lack of knowledge of diseases is still a significant hindrance to good health practices, leading to greater health risk, particularly in developing countries (Sokey *et al*., 2018).

Mass media messages can influence positive changes or avert negative changes in health-related behaviours in a country (Okpoko & Aniwada, 2017). The mass media – print and broadcast – and the internet have an unprecedented reach as communication channels. This ability is worth harnessing to improve public health. Health information is required to determine health needs, formulate data-driven policies and assess completed and ongoing health programmes. But scholars like Erubami *et al*. (2021) and international agencies like the World Bank assert that available health care information is too limited and difficult to access to serve the public adequately (Poverty and Health, 2014).

A very vital area where the public needs information is on different classes of diseases. Communicable and non communicable diseases are the two categories of diseases responsible for the deaths recorded yearly across the globe from ill health. Communicable diseases (CDs) are sicknesses caused by infectious agents that can be transmitted directly or indirectly from an infected person, an animal or the inanimate environment to a susceptible animal or human being. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), on the other hand, are diseases that are not transmissible from person to person or from animal hosts. NCDs are also referred to as chronic diseases that are caused by genetic makeup, biological degradation, behavioural or environmental factors (Chang *et al*., 2020) and by unhealthy industries like those selling over-processed food.

This study sought to determine the extent of coverage given to CDs and NCDs in Nigerian newspapers.

Statement of Problem

Communicable diseases like HIV/AIDs, Hepatitis, Ebola, Lassa fever and COVID-19 are considered more deadly because they can spread fast and are, therefore, given more priority than non-communicable diseases. However, according to a WHO fact sheet, NCDs "kill 41 million people each year, equivalent to 74% of all deaths globally," thus making them the leading cause of death (Noncommunicable diseases, 2023, para. 1). NCDs, like cancers and cardiovascular diseases, are debilitating and are suffered commonly by many for many years, particularly poorer people in countries like Nigeria who lack the resources to obtain effective treatment of them. This study, therefore, compared the coverage of CDs and NCDs by Nigerian newspapers to see whether the more rampant and endemic NCDs are receiving the kind of coverage that can help the public curb and combat them.

Research Questions

1. What is the frequency of reporting communicable diseases compared to non-communicable diseases in Nigerian newspapers?

2. Are stories of communicable and non-communicable diseases given prominence in Nigerian newspapers?
3. To what extent are stories on communicable and non-communicable diseases in Nigerian newspapers interpretative?

Scope of the Study

This study covered a period of four years, from January 2017-December 2020. This was due to the need for depth and to observe the coverage of NCDs before the emergence of COVID-19 which the media fixed their attention on as from 2020. The study used four national dailies – *Vanguard, Daily Sun, The Nation* and *The Guardian*. The content of the newspapers examined was limited to three CDs (Hepatitis, Lassa fever and COVID-19) and three NCDs (Diabetes, Stroke and Cancer).

Literature Review

This review begins with a look at the diseases covered in this study. Hepatitis is enlargement of the liver which can deteriorate to cirrhosis or liver cancer. Hepatitis viruses are the most common cause of hepatitis (WHO, n.d.). In its yearly Global Hepatitis Report, WHO reveals that "the number of lives lost due to viral hepatitis is increasing" and "the disease is the second leading infectious cause of death globally -- with 1.3 million deaths per year, the same as tuberculosis, a top infectious killer" (WHO Sounds Alarm on Viral Hepatitis, 2024).

Abutu (2018) cites Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Health as disclosing that more than 22 million Nigerians are infected with hepatitis B and more than 4 million with hepatitis C. The ministry further puts hepatitis B, as having a national prevalence of 11% and that of hepatitis C as 2.2%.

Lassa fever, on its part, is a zoonotic disease that "causes a severe haemorrhagic fever that is characterised by sore throat, muscular aches, nausea, vomiting, chest pain and abdominal throbbing" (Ogbu *et al.,* 2007 cited in Erubami *et al.*, 2021, p. 95). The animal host of Lassa virus is widely known as the multimammate rat which does not become ill when infected with the virus but can pass it in its urine and faeces (WHO, 2017). One out of 5 people infected with Lassa virus can have their organs like liver, spleen and kidneys severely affected (WHO, 2017).

Amodu and Fapohunda (2019) report that Lassa disease was discovered in 1969 in Lassa village in Borno State, Nigeria According to them, Lassa fever has been occurring in Nigeria intermittently since then in Edo, Ebonyi, Anambra and Plateau, among other states.

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. This virus resulted in a pandemic which began in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Basch *et al*., 2020). COVID-19 spreads largely through droplets from the mouth or nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes (WHO, 2021). Most people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus do not get severely ill but experience fever, dry cough, fatigue, loss of taste or smell, among other discomforting conditions. In worse cases, the infected find it hard to breathe and could find their speech and mobility hampered (WHO, 2021).

People with co-morbidities such as diabetes and cancers (two of the NCDs this study is on) are more vulnerable to COVID-19.

Diabetes is a group of diseases that manifests in high blood sugar because the pancreas cannot produce insulin – type 1 diabetes – or the body is unable to use the insulin or both – type 2 (American Diabetes Association, 2005). Diabetes is often terminal and can result in serious complications like blindness and amputations (Hou *et* al., 2016), kidney failure and stroke (WHO, 2020).

Diabetics experience such symptoms as frequent urination, excessive thirst, increased hunger and fatigue. According to WHO (2020), the number of people with diabetes rose from 108 million in 1980 to 422 million in 2014 and the incidence of the disease is growing exponentially in poorer countries.

WHO (2016) identifies stroke as the second leading cause of death and the third leading cause of disability. The world health body further discloses that 70% of strokes and 87% of stroke-related deaths happen in poorer countries. Strokes happen when the blood does not flow smoothly to the brain as when a clot occurs or when a blood vessel bursts, causing physical and mental impairment or death.

Cancer is a broad name for many diseases that can attack different parts of the body. Cancer usually manifests in the multiplication of abnormal cells that snuff out healthy cells and overtake many parts of the body, ultimately leading to death. (WHO, 2021)

Cancer is a leading cause of death in economically developed countries and the second leading cause in developing countries like Nigeria. Jemal *et al.* (2011) point to breast cancer in women and lung cancer in men as the commonest types.

All the aforementioned diseases are fairly common in Nigeria (WHO, 2023; Amodu & Fapohunda, 2019; Morounke *et al*., 2017; Dahiru *et al*., 2016; Arabambi *et al*., 2022). It is, therefore, imperative that media coverage of them be monitored and evaluated.

In this regard, Oyama and Okpara (2017) opine that the Nigerian media have done very little to enlighten people and make them conscious of their health and the diseases around them. Rather, the media seem fixated on politics, they claim.

In the same vein, Joseph *et al*. (2016) studied the role of the media in arming people with knowledge of Lassa fever. From their findings, radio scored 78.3%, followed by television (57.0%), while newspaper/magazine scored least (33.3%).

Joda & Aziengbe (2017) inquired into the knowledge and awareness of hepatitis B among students in a tertiary institution and found a moderate level of awareness and low knowledge of the disease. The researchers recommended that the media should set the agenda for the public with respect to hepatitis B. Similarly, Erubami *et al.* (2021), a study of the framing of Lassa fever in Nigerian newspapers, reported that the coverage of the disease "was mainly episodic with little media prominence, and its framing was too inadequate to compel the desired public health response" (p. 95). The researchers called for information on how to prepare for Lassa fever outbreaks to help curb its spread. The newspaper has two major advantages over other mass media in this respect as Okorie (2013) highlighted: its permanence and the possibility of referring to it as often as necessary.

Another study on Nigerian newspapers' coverage of diseases, Bello (2015), noted a fair coverage of HIV/AIDS, malaria and polio vis-à-vis other diseases studied. The researcher concluded that, in general, Nigerian newspapers have not given prominent coverage to health issues in their leads, editorials and other important pages. The researcher observed that based on interviews with health reporters, Nigerian newspapers appeared to give prominent attention to other issues like politics and economy, more than health issues. This, he posited, reduced the ability of the press to influence public policy on health. The results of the study also indicated that dissemination of health information by Nigerian newspapers correlated with an improvement in the health behaviours of newspaper readers in the country.

Apuke and Omar (2020) studied Nigerian newspapers' reporting of COVID-19 pandemic and their results showed that the Nigerian media covered the pandemic very frequently but most of the stories were short and in straight news form. They also found that most of the stories incited fear and alarm by harping on cases, mortality rates and limited resources to fight the pandemic.

For media coverage to truly benefit people, Ohaja, (2005) maintains that it has to go beyond reporting the 5Ws and H (the news elements) to answering the questions in readers' minds, explaining issues sufficiently to help them anticipate future occurrences and respond appropriately to them. This is what news interpretation is. She further holds that interpretative reporting provides insights on probable causes/effects and precedence (to understand if something has happened in the past anywhere and how it was handled). It, therefore builds an enlightened citizenry that is not blindsided by unexpected occurrences like disease outbreaks and onset of comorbidities associated with age, family medical history and environmental disasters. This is what newspaper coverage of health should accomplish and this study assessed how it is being carried out in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is undergirded by the Agenda Setting Theory and the Social Responsibility Theory.

Agenda Setting Theory

The term, "agenda setting" is credited to McCombs and Shaw (1972), who used it to describe a situation where media emphasis on an issue makes the public to discuss and consider it important. McQuail (2010, p. 548) defines agenda setting as a "process of media influence (intended or unintended) by which the relative importance of news events, issues or personages in the public mind are affected by the order of presentation (or relative salience) in news reports." The media can thus set the agenda for society by highlighting what they consider beneficial, thereby drawing the attention of both the government and citizens to it for further official or civic action.

In the context of this study, more reports on health issues that can educate people on causes, cures and ways of preventing diseases will help the public take their health more seriously and make informed decisions to safeguard and restore it when sickness occurs.

Social Responsibility Theory

This is one of the four theories of the press that shows how the press is organised in different political systems, the others being the Authoritarian Theory of the Press, common in the

feudal era and dictatorships today; the Libertarian Theory from the era of the Enlightenment and the Soviet-Communist Theory, which found expression in the defunct Soviet Union (Siebert *et al*., 1956).

The Social Responsibility Theory was advanced to address the excesses of the press in the libertarian era when freedom was often equated with licence. The 1947 Hutchins' Commission on Freedom of the Press mandated that the press should match its freedom with responsible conduct, which means reporting in the public interest, not catering to groups and pursuits that would tear society apart or operating solely for mercantile ends (Christians *et al*., 2009). With respect to this study, reporting on health matters is a public good because, as stated earlier, health is wealth, but individual members of society need to be equipped with adequate information to seek and maintain it, in the absence of which they will be unproductive and a burden to society. The role of the media in this health pursuit is apparent and needs to be performed dutifully, hence this study to evaluate how they have been doing so.

Methodology

This study adopted the content analysis method and the population comprised all Nigerian dailies. But to get a definite and accessible population, the researchers purposively selected four of the newspapers: *Vanguard, Daily Sun, The Nation* and *The Guardian* for actual study due to their national coverage, wide readership, and consistency. *Vanguard* was ranked 2nd, *The Nation* 3rd, *The Guardian* 4th and *Daily Sun* 6th, in 2019 Newspaper's Web Ranking of top newspapers in the country. The sample for the study was selected from the entire editions of these newspapers published over four years, from January 2017-December 2020, including Saturday and Sunday editions. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Nigeria in 2020 and appeared to hugely consume media attention. As a result, the researchers decided to go three years prior to the pandemic to give the study depth as well as find out if the supposed neglect of NCDs preceded the pandemic.

The sample size consisted of 224 editions of the selected newspapers. Fourteen editions of a newspaper per year were considered sufficient because Riffe *et al*. (1993) discovered that 12 editions of newspapers per year can form a sufficient sample. For each of the newspapers, therefore, 56 editions were content analysed giving a total of 224 editions for the four newspapers from the total population of 5,824 editions.

The study adopted constructed and continuous weeks method to arrive at the sample for data collection. The choice was because the method has the ability to eliminate bias (Ohaja, 2003). The continuous weeks and the days in the constructed weeks were chosen through simple random sampling.

Table 1: Constructed weeks for all the dailies from 2017 – 2020

2017							
Days	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Month	January	April	August	February	September	November	April
Weeks	5	15	31	7	36	47	13
Dates	30th	11th	2nd	16th	8th	25th	2nd
2018							
Days	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

Months	January	December	March	September	March	May	June
Weeks	2	50	11	38	10	19	23
Dates	8th	11th	14th	20th	9th	12th	10th
2019							
Days	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Month	September	February	September	April	November	November	July
Weeks	37	8	39	17	45	47	28
Dates	9th	19th	25th	25th	9th	23rd	14th
2020							
Days	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Month	January	July	June	March	May	August	May
Week	4	30	23	12	21	34	22
Dates	20th	21st	3rd	19th	22nd	22nd	31st

The continuous week for all the dailies for 2017 was Week 30, 24th-30th July; for 2018, Week 3, 15th-21st January; for 2019, Week 43, 21st-27th October and for 2020, Week 1, 1st-5th January.

The cues used for coding were the words – COVID-19 (or Coronavirus), Hepatitis (or Liver disease), Lassa fever, Diabetes, Cancer (or Tumor), and Stroke, as well as communicable (or infectious diseases) and non-communicable diseases (or non-infectious diseases). The only content included in the study were the ones that mentioned these cues in either their headlines or lead paragraphs to ensure that tangential mentions did not clutter up the data.

The units of analysis for the study were news stories, editorials, letters to the editor, opinion articles/columns, interview stories, features, advertorials, announcements, cartoons and photographs related to the aforementioned health topics in the selected newspapers. The measuring instrument was a code sheet validated by two communication research experts. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed by getting two coders to separately code a sub-sample of 25 editions. The inter-coder reliability test using Holsti's formula yielded an acceptable co-efficient of .88. The data were analysed with frequency tables, percentages and ratios.

Presentation of Findings

Research Question 1: What is the frequency of reporting communicable diseases compared to non-communicable diseases in Nigerian newspapers?

Table 2: Distribution of stories according to type of disease

Disease	**Newspaper**				**Total**
	Daily Sun	**Vanguard**	**The Guardian**	**The Nation**	
	F %	**F %**	**F %**	**F %**	**F %**
CDs	1 0%	-	-	-	1 0%
COVID-19	44 23%	28 15%	30 16%	29 15%	131 69%
Hepatitis	2 1%	-	-	-	2 1%
Lassa Fever	6 3%	4 2%	6 3%	3 2%	19 10%
Total	**53 28%**	**32 17%**	**36 19%**	**32 17%**	**153 81%**
NCDs	-	-	-	-	-
Diabetes	2 1%	1 0%	4 2%	1 0%	8 4%
Stroke	-	-	-	-	-

Cancer	3 2%	4 2%	15 8%	7 4%	24 13%
Total	5 3%	5 3%	19 10%	8 4%	32 17%
Grand Total	**58 31%**	**37 19%**	**55 29%**	**40 21%**	**190 100%**

A total of 190 stories were the content found on the chosen CDs and NCDs in the selected newspapers. *Daily Sun* newspaper had the highest coverage 58 (31%), followed closely by *The Guardian* newspaper with 55 (29%). while *Vanguard* had the least, 37 (19%). Table 2 also shows that only the *Daily Sun* used the term, "communicable disease" and it did so once. The coverage of CDs as a group was substantially greater than the NCDs in all the newspapers (totalling 153 or 81% and 32 or 17% for the NCDs. This put the ratio of CDs to NCDs at approximately 5 to 1. The disease covered the most by the papers was COVID-19 (131 or 69%) and this can be explained by the raging pandemic in 2020. There was no story with the term, "non-communicable disease" and none on stroke.

Research Question 2: Are stories of communicable and non-communicable diseases given prominence in Nigerian newspapers?

Table 3: Distribution of stories according to page placement

Page Placement	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	The Nation	Total
	F %	F %	F %	F %	F %
Front	1 0%	-	5 3%	1 0%	7 3%
Centre	-	-	-	-	-
Back	1 0%	-	-	-	1 0%
Inside	56 29%	37 19%	50 26%	39 21%	182 96%

Table 4: Distribution of stories according to length

Length	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	The Nation	Total
	F %	F %	F %	F %	F %
Full Spread	-	-	5 3%	1 0%	6 2%
One Page	10 5%	6 3%	5 3%	3 2%	24 10%
Half Page	16 7%	5 3%	13 7%	6 3%	40 17%
Quarter Page	15 8%	11 4%	11 6%	11 6%	48 21%
Below Quarter Page	17 9%	15 8%	21 11%	19 10%	72 38%

Table 5: Distribution of stories according to illustrations

Illustration	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	The Nation	Total
	F %	F %	F %	F %	F %
With	24 13%	10 5%	25 13%	14 7%	73 38%
Without	34 18%	27 14%	30 16%	26 14%	117 62%

Whether measured by page placement, story length/magnitude or use of illustrations, the findings in Tables 3-5 show that stories on the diseases studied did not receive prominence in the newspapers. The majority were tucked into inside pages (182 or 96%), covered less than a quarter of a page (72 or 38%) and were without illustrations (117 or 62%). The ratio of stories on the inside pages to those on the front and back pages amounted to approximately 23 to 1 while that of stories without illustrations to those with illustrations was about 2 to 1.

Research Question 3: To what extent are stories on communicable and non-communicable diseases in Nigerian newspapers interpretative?

Table 6: Distribution of stories according to story genres

Genre	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	The Nation	Total
	F %	F %	F %	F %	F %
News	38 20%	33 17%	33 17%	33 17%	137 72%
Feature	5 3%	-	14 7%	3 2%	22 12%
Interview	6 3%	3 2%	4 2%	2 1%	15 8%
Comment	6 2%	1 0%	3 2%	2 1%	12 6%
Editorial	2 1%	-	1 0%	-	3 2%
Column	1 0%	-	-	-	1 0%

Table 7: Distribution of stories according to interpretativeness

Interpretation	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	The Nation	Total
	F %	F %	F %	F %	F %
Interpretative	20 11%	5 3%	22 12%	7 4%	54 28%
Non-interpretative	38 20%	32 17%	33 17%	33 17%	136 72%

When measured by story genres as shown in Table 6, the coverage of the selected diseases was not interpretative as most of the stories were in news form (137 or 72%) with only 22 or 12% in feature form. The ratio of the news stories to the features which are usually the primary interpretative stories was, therefore, 6 to 1. Similarly, when all the story genres were checked for interpretation elements like historical background, explanation of meaning, localisation and varying viewpoints as enunciated by Ohaja (2005), 136 or 72% were found to be non-interpretative. This meant that overall, the ratio of non-interpretative stories to the interpretative ones was about 3 to 1.

Discussion of Findings

The findings for the first research question indicate that preponderance of stories on diseases are about the infectious ones and that sicknesses which cause much fatality and disability like diabetes and stroke get minimal to no attention. The prevalence of these diseases in Nigeria as the evidence from Dahiru *et al*. (2016), Morounke *et* al., (2017) and WHO (2016) show demands more attention from the media to facilitate agenda setting about them.

The findings for the second research question confirm previous findings from scholars like Erubami *et al*. (2021) and Bello (2015). These findings show that Nigerian newspapers do not give the kind of salience to health stories that can put them on the front burner of public discourse or drive meaningful policy interventions.

With respect to the third research question, interpretation does not seem to be the norm in newspaper coverage of diseases. This falls short of the expectations of the Social Responsibility Theory as it is part of the duty of the press to explain causes and effects of phenomena, including sicknesses; dispel myths and superstitions that uphold detrimental health practices and direct people to the appropriate professionals for treatment. It is also the responsibility of the press to monitor how budget allocations for treatment facilities are utilised and to remind the government to maintain existing health care facilities and build

new ones. The newspapers, which by their nature, can accommodate in-depth, interpretative reports are, however, offering more of skeletal stories that hardly go beyond the basic news elements contrary to the exposition on news interpretation by Ohaja (2005).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The press is charged with playing a pivotal role in societal well being and it cannot do this by offering capsular and superficial stories, particularly when reporting about sicknesses, which though prevalent are not widely understood in terms of prevention and management protocols. While massive reporting of infectious disease outbreaks may be helpful at the time of emergencies, steady education of the public about both communicable and non-communicable diseases in simple, relatable language that identifies risks but also proffers feasible remedies will serve society better. The media should thus set agenda through their coverage of health and disease that would better position people to overcome sickness and drive official interventions that positively affect people's health.

Future researchers that want to expand on the topic of this study may conduct surveys to examine how newspaper coverage influences readers' knowledge and actions regarding communicable and non-communicable diseases.

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