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Using Background Information to Enhance News: A Study of Nigerian Newspapers' Covid-19 Stories

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Abstract

This study evaluates Covid-19 news reports by Nigerian newspapers on the Covid-19 pandemic in a bid to establish the extent of background information used in these reports as well as factors that drive the usage. It adopts the historical methodology and oral/in-depth interviews to extract heuristic and useful information from the news desks of ten newspapers. The evaluation shows that only three newspapers reported the pandemic when it broke out in Nigeria in February 2020 while one, surprisingly, provided background information. It turned out newsroom politics, professional issues, poor sense of news judgment, undue government influence, proprietorial interests, newsroom production pressure, and the phobia of technological application inhibited the inclusion of background information in stories. More contributory to the hindrance was the fixation on the two-dimensional reporting which emphasizes the traditional 5Ws + H whose limitation is of concern. The recommendation suggests that journalists embrace the three-dimensional system which promotes comprehensive reporting.

Keywords: Background Information, gatekeeping, agenda-setting, news reporting, uses and gratifications, Nigeria.

Introduction

Leading communication scholars across the world, especially Hulteng & Nelson (1983), Herbert (1985), Sobowale (1985), McDonald (1989), Harris (1992), Fedler et al (2005), Popoola (2009), Akinfeleye (2011), amongst others, have written extensively on the structure of a news story as well as the desirability of background information in every news story. Every bona fide news reporter has been trained or oriented on the importance of background information and why it is mandatory to include it in every news story. A news story is incomplete if it is not richly backgrounded. Background information is the research component of a news story that can be produced, among others, from back issues of newspapers, magazines, and other media outlets, including the internet Popoola, 2009; Okorie, Loto & Omojola, 2018; Folayan, *et al.*, 2018).

A well-established news medium is enhanced by a well-stocked library. The top duty of the librarian is that of filing the clippings of stories topic-by-topic or subject-by-subject for easy sourcing or retrieving whenever the need arises to write background information. In the internet era, the librarian has become

the custodian of e-copies of various editions of media news reports. With this arrangement in place, once there is breaking news, the reporter must visit the library and request the clippings on such stories in the past, read through, and extract aspects that would be used to background the story. As this study shows, this vital professional step was surprisingly omitted by the majority of the Nigerian press at a critical time when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in China in 2019 and on February 2, 72020 in Nigeria.

The omission was a professional blunder and delinquency in the sense that if the stories were fleshed up with adequate backgrounding, the difficulties experienced by Federal and State authorities, while trying to enforce compliance with the lockdown to prevent heavy casualties, would have been less. This failure informed the necessity of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Professional news reporting began in Nigeria when two weeks vocation course in journalism was conducted in 1954 at the University of Ibadan (Akinfeleye 2007). News reporting in the country had been limited or restricted to the two-dimensional (2-D) reporting of who says what, when,

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and how, otherwise known as 5Ws + H; the serving servants of news writing and reporting. This describes a 2-dimensional reporting in which the 5Ws constitute a dimension while the H represents the other dimension.

Omojola (2012), quoting Baker (1994), described this dimension as a façade, deceptive and partial. A popular communication theory, the gatekeeping theory has similarly had unintentional negative impacts on reporters. The theory made it compelling for every news reporter, line editor, and other editorial staff involved in editorial gatekeeping to either keep certain information away or edit them out of the manuscript. What the news reporters have been offering their audience can be equated with fluids, when they ought to have given their audience something to chew/bite. This practice is part of the reasons why Nigerian newspapers failed to properly sensitize their audience to the dangers ahead when Covid-19 broke out on February 27, 2020. Across the world, news reporting has gone beyond the parameters of 5Ws + H, because it has been established that behind each of the serving servants, there are many other questions worthy of unraveling to adequately serve public interests.

Objectives of the Study

This study critically examines the structure of press reports on the Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria in the light of the following objectives:

- i. To evaluate the usage/application of professional background information by the selected newspapers in their reportage of Covid-19, when it broke out in Nigeria.
- ii. To identify factors responsible for the usage or non-usage of professional background information in news reporting of Covid-19 by the selected newspapers.
- iii. investigate the consequences of usage or non-application of professional background information on Covid-19 news break on newspaper audience in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The objectives are repositioned as the following questions:

- i. To what extent do news reporters in Nigeria apply professional background information in their reportage of Covid-19 when the news broke out in Nigeria?

- ii. What are the factors responsible for the usage or non-usage of professional background information in reporting Covid-19 by the selected newspapers?
- iii. What are the consequences of usage or non-usage of professional background information on the Covid-19 news break on newspaper audience in Nigeria?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it reveals that if the newspapers had applied background information, the magnitude of 3,053 people who died of Covid in Nigeria could have been less. Across the world, news stories should provide spin-off topics for features. However, and very painful, this study observed that none of the newspapers provided a feature follow-up to the Covid outbreak after it was first reported. Traditionally and professionally, all the newspapers should have given the Covid news break an immediate feature treatment under a historical feature which would have significantly reduced the casualty.

Literature Review

In the context of Fedler, *et al.* (2005), background information is a piece of

substantiated information that has stood the test of time, putting it in the public domain. It is described as substantiated information because, before the publication of every news story, proper gatekeeping by way of verifying for accuracy, coherence, and clarity must have taken place. Once the story is published, it becomes public domain that could be checked through public libraries or online.

Writing from the perspective of compelling reasons for background information, Popoola (2009) states that it remains the only way by which every news medium could remind, inform, educate or sensitize their audience to the history of the story under investigation. For instance, if the story is about a plane crash, once the “who says what”, “when” and “how” of the story is written, the reporter must refresh the audience with the history of the first Nigerian-owned aircraft disaster of 20th November 1969 when a government-owned DC-10 aircraft plying the Lagos-London route crashed in Lagos, killing all the 87 passengers and crew members onboard. The reporter, in the same way, would be expected in the same report to mention the last air crash, Dana Air Flight 992 plying the Abuja-Lagos route in which 153 passengers

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onboard perished on June 3, 2012, in Agege, Lagos, Nigeria.

The above reason could have made Hulteng and Nelson (1983) contend that when background information is appropriately handled, its inclusion in the overall report is unquestionably beneficial to the consumer of news.

As a general rule, most journalists and news channels try to be scrupulous in their use of background information. When such reportage is well done, its inclusion in the overall report is unquestionably beneficial to the consumer of news. (Hulteng & Nelson, 1983:37)

Fedler *et al.* (2005) observe that many reporters are fond of devoting the second paragraph of their news story to background information thereby making the subsequent paragraphs dull because it emphasizes routine, insignificant details, the fact remains that it could come up at the beginning or tail end of a news report. For example, when mysterious deaths hit Kano, Nigeria in April 2020, about 20 prominent indigenes of the city including two royal fathers were reportedly struck by the strange illness, died, and were buried the same day. Amongst the 20 were six professors. Two days later, another

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professor, this time around, a former Head of the Department of Mass Communication also died after a brief illness. A reporter who is asked to anchor the story can commence it with background information like this:

Barely 48 hours after a strange illness struck Kano, killing 20 prominent indigenes, another professor has died of the same illness.

McDonald (1989) however adds that background information could be introduced elsewhere as needed in a news story. It is the nature of the story at hand that will determine where the background story should be placed. While alluding to McDonald's assertion, Itule and Anderson (2008) stress that background information could come from a news source who explains something technical or from the reporters in a bid to make a story clearer.

Fedler, *et al.* (2005), in a related perspective, argue that some people say they are speaking off the record when they mean they are speaking on background. Most times, in such a situation the news source tends to provide background information to support or shed more light on what he or she has said, although the reporter is not expected to use such information or use without attributing

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to the source. These authors however emphasized that reporters sometimes use off-the-record information as leads to other sources. It is instructive, however, to stress that background information has transformed from the age-long analog to digital. During the analog era, reporters go to the library to consult and extract background information from newspaper clippings. However, in this era of globalization and ICT, backgrounding is carried out through the internet. Telephone calls could also be made to experts where archival information is not readily available.

Popoola (2012) further describes backgrounding as one of the ways by which every medium of information dissemination could fulfill their professional, statutory, and obligatory roles to the public. According to this author, there is no better way by which the news media could carry out the obligatory, statutory, as well as professional roles of informing and enlightening the citizenry without proper background to their news reports.

Theoretical Framework

The agenda-setting of the press and uses and gratifications theories are employed to contextualize this study. Popoola (2003, 2017) contend that

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whenever the need arises to let members of the public attach seriousness to an issue, the agenda-setting theory of the press readily comes to mind. Alluding to Folarin (1998), Popoola says “agenda setting implies that the mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time, in a given society. While noting that the theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we think, he adds that it, however, ascribes to the media, the power to determine what we are thinking about.

The essential principle of the theory, according to Baran and Davis (2009) is premised on the idea that the media do not tell people what to think, but what to think about. Popoola (2017) stresses further that the principle behind the theory was meticulously and rigorously articulated by Walter Lippman through the classic text, *Public Opinion* (1922). The idea was later revised and fine-tuned by Bernard Cohen in 1963. Daramola (2012) states that the basic idea of the theory is that there is a close relationship between the manners in which the news media present issues and the order of importance assigned to those issues by those exposed to the news. In the context of this study, background information offers media

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professionals an excellent opportunity of presenting news to the audience or members of the public in a manner they would continuously ruminate over the issues.

The idea of uses and gratifications theory on its part was borne out of a concerted effort to convince communication researchers to concentrate less on probing what the mass media was doing to the people (effects) but should rather dissipate their energy on probing what they were doing with the mass media. While referencing Elihu Katz, the proponent of the theory, Blake and Haroldsen (1975), cited in Popoola (2017), maintains that even the most potent of the mass media could not ordinarily influence an individual who has no use for it in the social and psychological environment in which he lives. To date, communication scholars are united in their verdict that nobody uses the media just for the fun of it but rather out of certain fundamental reasons (Popoola 2006; Odiboh, Omojola, & Oyesomi, 2020; Igbonoba et al., 2020).

The fact remains that newspaper readers are strongly motivated by a strong desire to read a newspaper, either online or hardcopy due to certain derivable benefits. During the lockdown, despite the presence of social media, many newspaper audiences defiled the stay-at-home

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order and thronged newsstands to glance at the cover pages of the various national dailies or probably pick one or two copies of the newspaper of their choice. This is the more reason why media professionals should have seized the opportunity, which the uses and gratifications theory presents, by properly backgrounding their stories in a way that Covid-19 should have been very easy to fight. Indeed, the daily released statistical figures by the National Centre For Disease Control (NCDC) are not only scary but alarming.

Methodology

In the newsroom of media organizations, background information is generally regarded as the historical account of published news reports. Therefore, the study uses the historical methodology, backed up with oral/in-depth interviews. The Faculty of Philosophy of Heidelberg University Compendium on the historical methodology described it as the method which helps historians evaluate and analyze historical source materials. Adeboye (2001) cited in Popoola (2015) similarly describes it as an interdisciplinary approach to carrying out academic research. Therefore, the study uses the historical method of analysis in analyzing the deficiency of Nigerian newspapers in their usage of

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background information in their news reports on the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The study is, therefore, descriptive and analytical in nature. It uses secondary sources such as archival materials from newspaper libraries as well as online sources. Relevant information and data obtained from the above sources were interpreted and analyzed, within the context of historical methodology. In a bid to obtain first-hand information on the factors responsible for the non-application of background information, the study similarly employed the oral/in-depth interview method in gathering information from reporters on the news desk of the selected newspapers.

Population: The population for the study consisted of 19 major newspapers extracted from the list of 57 print media establishments in Nigeria as identified by Popoola (2015). The population, however, excluded all the magazines in the country as well as newspapers currently out of circulation in February 2020 when the Covid-19 virus broke out in Nigeria.

Sample Size: The sample size for the study is ten dominant newspapers purposively selected from a population of 19. This represents 53% of all the traditional newspapers in Nigeria. The sampled newspapers are *Daily Trust*, *New Telegraph*, *Daily Times*, *Daily Independent*, *ThisDay*, *The Guardian*,

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The Punch, *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *Vanguard*.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This study evaluated the application of background information in the reportage of the Covid-19 pandemic by the traditional media in Nigeria. The questions that guide the study are reiterated to address them empirically.

Research Question 1: *To what extent do news reporters in Nigeria apply professional background information in their reportage of Covid-19 when the news broke out in Nigeria?*

A careful perusal of the cover pages as well as the continuation pages of the selected newspapers revealed that three out of ten newspapers, that is, 30% carried the news report prominently on February 28, 2020, without background information.

The first case of Covid-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa is very significant and newsworthy, going by the magnitude of people already killed elsewhere by the disease, and therefore deserves the serious attention of every news medium in the country. The three newspapers that confirmed the story on their cover pages prominently are *ThisDay*, *Daily Trust*, and *Daily Times*. Incredibly and painful enough, none of them gave the story any background information by rendering the brief history of the pandemic for their audiences. The

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newspapers shortchanged their audiences.

The only newspaper that provided scanty background information, even though not on its cover page, was *The Nation*, that is, 10% as it reports that:

As at Friday morning, 82,294 cases of the disease have been confirmed globally. The disease has also spread to Brazil, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, and Macedonia.

The implication of the above is that 10% provided background information, while 60% of the studied newspapers ignored the story. In other words, the 30% that carried the reports failed to provide timely background information which is in the best interest of the security, physical and mental health, and well-being of their audiences.

Research Question 2: *What are the factors responsible for the usage (or non-usage) of professional background information in reporting Covid-19 news stories by the selected newspapers?* Two major factors could be adduced for the non-usage of professional background information by the 60% of the selected newspapers as well as the three i.e. 30% that carried the news report without background information. Such factors from previous scholarly studies by Popoola (2009) and Akinfeleye (2011) include:

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1. *Professional delinquency*: A professional, in the words of Kessler and McDonald (1989), is one who knows what they are doing. They carry out their business with assured competence, they have high personal standards of excellence for their performance, they respect others without kowtowing to them, and they are assertive, forceful, and insistent as they do their jobs. Professional delinquents are bereft of these attributes.
2. *Inadequacy of 5Ws & H of news reporting*: News reporters in Nigeria are engrossed with two-dimensional reporting, otherwise called 5Ws & H. It is a dimension with heavy reliance on the serving servants – who says what, when, where, why, and how? This is too restrictive, narrow, and undesirable. As it is, reporters tend to feel that once they have incorporated the 5Ws & H in their news report, they are in order and good to go to the press.

Research Question 3: *What are the consequences of usage (or non-usage) of professional background information on Covid-19 newsbreak on the newspaper audience in Nigeria?*

The consequences are highly severe. People buy newspapers primarily to consume the content. Despite the economic crunch when the cry across

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the length and breadth of the country was on palliatives to cushion the effects of Covid-19, newspaper audiences still bought newspapers to gratify their desire or satisfy their needs. The needs ranged from:

- i. To be updated by getting the latest news on the pandemic within and outside the country.
- ii. To become an informed and enlightened citizen during the pandemic.
- iii. To apply knowledge gained from the papers in their day-to-day life, to avoid being infected by the virus.

All the above reasons are some of the unquantifiable benefits which newspaper audiences lost as a result of the non-usage of background information by the selected newspapers.

Discussion of the Findings

A scripture from the Holy Bible goes thus:

Whatever happens or can happen has already happened before. God makes the same thing happen again and again. (*Ecclesiastes* 3:15 – Good News version)

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The above quote is very apt in opening this section of the paper. It confirms that truly, there is nothing new under the sun. While there is nothing new under the sun, human memory is very short. The shortness of human memory makes background information to every news story compelling in a bid to refresh the memory of the audience. Okon *et al.* (2018) and Opubor (1985) assert the basic goal of the media is fact-finding and fact-giving. That is the function of news operations; determining what is and saying that it is and saying so publicly.

If the scripture says it is God's act for things to happen again and again, and the role of the press is fact-finding and fact-giving, the press, therefore, remains the only institution that is constitutionally and strategically placed to avail the society of relevant things, events or occurrences that have taken place in the society over the years. The avenue through which this could be done is through background information.

This study has shown how the traditional newspapers in Nigeria failed their audiences by not devoting enough space to reporting the Covid-19 pandemic when the virus broke out in Nigeria in 2020. Some 30% of the studied newspapers carried the report without background information while only one, that is, *The Nation*

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representing 10%, had scanty background information. The implication of their failure could be seen in the difficulty faced by the government to enforce the various lockdown measures to stem the tide of people being afflicted daily by the Covid-19 pandemic.

An Islamic cleric in Kano was quoted by Popoola and Ejiwunmi (2020) while addressing his followers as thus:

When Cholera killed 500 people in Kano, we saw their bodies; we saw where they were buried, but where are the bodies of those killed by their Coronavirus...Coronavirus is a hoax.

Source: @Speechedge Instagram post on April 26, 2020; https://www.instagram.com/p/B_bLR4vnbol/?igshid=4hj0oxkxb90

If all the newspapers had rendered adequate background information on the history of the pandemic, the response of the public to the various lockdown measures put in place by Federal and State Governments would have been different. Similarly, some religious leaders defied government lockdown measures, perceiving it as an attack from the Federal Government that is being led by a Muslim, who is perceived to be an enemy of Christians. Several churches and mosques were

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forcibly closed by the government. It was the same story from the drivers' union, market women, and some owners of private schools. During these high waves of the pandemic, it appears as if all the people felt that the government was being unfair to them; whereas, if the press had furnished the public with adequate background information on the 1918 pandemic, the situation would have been more tolerable or at least different, and the casualty rate which *ThisDayLive* put at 3,053 would have reduced.

Corroborating the need for adequate backgrounding in Press reports of Covid-19, an excerpt from a *Daily Progress* archive titled "Public gatherings are disallowed" that would have disarmed the warring groups stated:

At a meeting of the board of the health of the city, it was decided that in view of the spread of Influenza, that we would make no mistake to stop all public gatherings until the disease is abated. Therefore, I order all schools, public and private, churches and theatres, and all other places where there are public congregations closed — until Monday, October 14, 1918.

Source: Daily Progress — October 5, 1918; retrieved April 9, 2020.

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Similarly, Stout and Wood (2020), cited by the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, said concerning the 1918 pandemic that it affected 500 million people, a figure which represented about a quarter of the world's population then. They further put the death toll at between 17 to 50 million people, making it the deadliest pandemic in human history.

Concerning Nigeria, on September 14, 1918, an ocean liner - *S.S Bida* - arrived in Lagos with passengers already afflicted by influenza. Some were said to have boarded the ship in Accra, Ghana. Upon arrival in Lagos, they transmitted the disease to Lagosians, and from Lagos, it spread to other parts of Nigeria through the railway. Overcrowded Nigerian cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, Ilorin, Calabar, Onitsha, Ogoja, and Zaria were more affected. It could, therefore, be seen that the 1918 pandemic shared many things in common with that of Covid-19, which the media ought to have used maximally for the benefit of their audience, but neglected.

The slight difference between the 1918-19 pandemic and that of the Covid-19 disease in Nigeria is that while the 1918-19 disease entered Nigeria through the seaport, that of Covid-19 entered Nigeria through the airport.

The Nigerian press, therefore, failed during the period to set agenda

for public morality, safety, health, and well-being of the people which is the main objective of the agenda-setting theory of the press. Since they failed to set the right agenda, the public thus had no useful or heuristic information to gain as rightly put forward or advocated by the theory. In a bid to ascertain factors responsible for the newspapers' non-application of background information, some factors were identified by media professionals on the news desk of the sampled newspapers. They include professional delinquency, poor sense of news judgment, newsroom politics, newsroom production pressure, proprietorial interest, the undue influence of government, and phobia of technological application.

Of these factors, 70 percent of the media professionals identified politics, that is, the art of statecraft at the newsroom level which is always at work in the choice of stories to cover, who is to cover it, where it would be published (cover page, inside page, political page or health page) prominence to be given to it, photographs to accompany it, and so forth, as the major factors. The global definition of news as who says what, when and how (Popoola 2019; Morah & Omojola, 2020) as well as the conception of politics in terms of who gets what when, and how are daily routine political functions of the newsroom of newspapers.

public at the critical moment of Covid-19.

Summary and Recommendations

The study evaluated and critiqued the newspaper application of background information by the Nigerian newspapers when Covid-19 broke out in the country on February 27, 2020. The study found that only 30% of the studied newspapers carried the report but failed to give the story professional backgrounding, while 10% provided background information with 60% of the studied newspapers ignoring the story outright. The paper perceived their failure as a serious professional breach and ethically faulty. Quoting Merrill (1974), Popoola (2017) described ethics as a duty to self and others. He stressed that in this case, the press failed in their duties to themselves and the society at large just as their failure has a direct correlation with the lukewarm attitude of members of the public to the various lockdown measures announced by the Federal and State governments in Nigeria.

Graber (1990) asserts that the media can attract and direct attention to problems as well as solutions. He similarly argued that the media can be a channel for persuasion and mobilization. From Graber's perspective, therefore, the studied newspapers failed to attract and direct public attention to the problem of Covid-19 as well as the lockdown solutions. They similarly failed to rightly persuade and mobilize the

Consequent to the above, the paper put forward the following recommendations:

- i. There is a need for Nigerian newspapers to jettison the 5Ws and H of news reporting and embrace the 3-D dimension, which makes it compelling for news reporters to deeply probe and unravel other questions of public interest behind the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How of news reporting, with adequate backgrounding.
- ii. There is a need for training and retraining of news reporters and other media professionals that are involved in the gate-keeping chain of newspaper production.
- iii. Newsroom politics: High politics exist in the newsroom over which story to be covered and given space in the newsroom of every medium of information dissemination. Such politics should not affect stories of national interest such as that of Covid-19, which 90% of the studied newspapers failed to report with adequate background information.

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