

# Newspaper Coverage of Ebola Virus Disease Epidemic in Nigeria: Implications for Prevention and Control

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## Abstract

*Ebola virus disease (otherwise referred to as EVD) broke out in Nigeria in July, 2014. The epidemic which raged on for nearly three months, came to an end with the World Health Organization declaring Nigeria Ebola free in October, 2014. This study analyzed newspaper coverage of the epidemic during the period. It examined the nature and extent of coverage of EVD in three widely circulated newspapers in Nigeria. Between July, 2014 and October, 2014, 1118 articles about EVD in The Guardian, The Punch, and Vanguard newspapers were identified and analyzed. The study revealed that the most common EVD theme covered by newspaper articles within the period was Government/ Institutional measures and response (271 articles), followed by cases of EVD in Nigeria (270 articles). Most importantly, the study observed that newspaper coverage of the EVD epidemic had implications for prevention and control, as portrayed by the commendations of individuals, corporate bodies and the Government.*

**Key Words:** Ebola Virus Disease, Nigeria, Newspaper Coverage, Prevention, Control, World Health Organization

## Introduction

Ebola virus disease (EVD), formerly known as Ebola hemorrhagic fever, is a severe, often fatal illness in humans. It is one of the world's most virulent diseases and up to 90% of sufferers die from the virus. The average EVD case fatality rate is around 50%. Case fatality rates have varied from 25% to 90% in past outbreaks. More than 3,400 people in West Africa died in the year 2014 Ebola outbreak (WHO 2014, Butterly 2014, Rush and Gander, 2014). The disease was said to have been transmitted to humans through contact with the blood, organs and other bodily fluids of infected animals like fruit bats, primates, antelopes and porcupines. Suffice to say that infected humans, thereafter transmitted it to others and the cycle apparently continues. Symptoms of the disease include fever, intense weakness, muscle pain, headache and a sore throat. These then develop into vomiting, diarrhoea, rashes, impaired kidney and liver function, and in some cases, a combination of internal and external bleeding.

The outbreak in West Africa is said to have started in Guinea sometimes in early 2014. The disease spread from Guinea to Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. There were reports of a case each of the disease in Mali and Senegal.

The transmission of the disease into Nigeria was dramatic. According to Faisal (2014), an acutely ill traveler (Mr. Patrick Sawyer) from Liberia arrived at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos, Nigeria, and was confirmed to have Ebola virus disease (Ebola) after being admitted to a private hospital on Sunday July 20, 2014. Obviously, the test for EVD was carried out when Mr. Sawyer who was placed on medication failed to respond to treatment and began to develop "hemorrhagic symptoms". Further questions were posed to him. But he denied ever having contact with any persons with EVD at home or in any other hospital or at any burial ceremony (Information Nigeria, 2014). It was alleged that 'Mr. Patrick Sawyer 'knew he was sick' with the virus before his entry into Nigeria. He flew to Nigeria and died, transmitting the virus to

Nigerian medical personnel who offered medical services to him' (Information Nigeria, 2014). Thereafter, the disease was transmitted by medical personnel to relatives and friends. The Nigerian Government in collaboration with internal and external health institutions, non Governmental agencies and the media successfully curtailed the scourge, such that in October, 2014, the World Health Organization declared Nigeria Ebola free.

One of the key functions of the media in any society is health communication. The media are veritable sources of health information and can help to shape the way people act and react towards health issues. More importantly, the media help to create awareness and mobilize members of the public to cooperate with health authorities in the fight against an epidemic at any given time (Onyeizu and Binta, 2014).

This work therefore seeks to examine newspaper coverage of the Ebola virus disease (EVD) epidemic in Nigeria. It also seeks to analyze the various EVD themes coverage with a view to establishing the role of the media in awareness, prevention and control of the scourge.

#### **Objectives of the study**

1. To examine the number of newspaper articles published on EVD during the epidemic in Nigeria.
2. To examine and analyze the content of newspaper articles on EVD published during the scourge.
3. To examine the likelihood of newspaper coverage having any effect on prevention and eventual control of EVD epidemic in Nigeria.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Agenda-Setting Theory. According to Baran and Davis (2009), the theory opines that there is a significant relationship between media reports and peoples' ranking of public issues. The theory establishes a correlation between the rate at which the media cover a story and the value people place on such a story. Peoples' reactions toward a story are influenced by the extent to which the story is important to them. In summary, the prominence given by the media (whether newspaper, electronic or broadcast) to an issue can influence the extent of importance people place on such an issue, which can in turn determine their reaction to such issue. The prominence the media gives to an health issue can influence peoples' opinions and reactions towards the issue.

#### **Literature Review**

Ebola hemorrhagic fever (EHF) now referred to as Ebola virus disease (EVD) first appeared in Africa in

1976; it was not seen again until 1994 (Peters and Peters, 1999). Between 1994 and 1996, no less than five independent active sites of Ebola virus transmission were indentified in Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon. In March, 2014, a fresh outbreak of the disease was reported in Guinea (WHO, 2014). Between March and September, 2014, it had spread to four other countries – Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Senegal.

According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), EVD is one of the most deadly diseases in the world in terms of morbidity and mortality. Between March and September, 2014, the epidemic had 4507 confirmed and probable cases in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Senegal (World Health Organization, 2014). Out of this number, an alarming 2296 deaths were reported. According to the World Health Organization, majority of these deaths reportedly took place in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Within this period, Nigeria had 18 confirmed cases and recorded 7 deaths, including the index case that brought the disease from Liberia.

Nigeria's handling of the epidemic, both in terms of prevention and control of the disease has been commended by the international community including the World Health Organization (Sifferlin, 2014). The disease which entered the country in July, 2014 was totally eradicated in October, 2014, with the World Health Organization declaring Nigeria Ebola free. In a country of over 160 million people, the disease infected only 18 people, with its spread limited to only two cities. Sifferlin (2014) posited that the country obviously did some things right. The role of the Government, international and non governmental agencies and the media in achieving this feat cannot be ignored. Inuwa (2007) defined 'media' as a collective means of communication by which the general public or populace is kept informed about the day to day happenings in the society. The media, also referred to as 'the press' is broadly classified into two – electronic or broadcast media and print media (Newspapers). Lovejoy (2007) observed that the media is 'explicitly involved in society's shared understanding and knowledge of health issues'. Uwom and Oloyede (2014) noted that the media have the ability to effectively communicate health information and effective health information can affect individuals' awareness, attitudes and behavior change. Diedong (2013) observed that the print media (newspapers) play a central role in promoting the knowledge of people on issues of health as well as shaping our understanding of medicine and science in general. Empirical studies have shown that 'print media's dissemination of health information is important in shaping public beliefs and possibly behaviors' (Moyer, 1995). The role of

newspapers in health education lie in their capacity and capability to teach, manipulate, sensitize and mobilize people through information dissemination (Nwabueze, 2005).

Newspaper reports and messages are seen as integral source of public policy depending on selection and presentation of issues (Diedong, 2013). Kiraga et al (1996) confirmed a strong association between newspaper messages and health practices among people in Nigeria.

Adeyemi (2014) noted that the media deserved to be given award for their role in Ebola containment in Nigeria. According to Adeyemi, the media provided intensive awareness and enlightened publications during the outbreak of the virus.

### Materials and Methods

The study employed content analysis of print editions of newspapers to investigate newspaper coverage of Ebola virus disease scourge in Nigeria. Three Nigerian newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Punch* and *Vanguard* were selected for the study. These newspapers were selected because of their national reach and readership. Four months issues of each newspaper covering a period of between July – October, 2014 were used for the study. The period coincides with

the outbreak and subsequent control of the Ebola virus disease in Nigeria. A total of 123 issues of each newspaper were used, amounting to 369 issues of the three newspapers under consideration. The newspapers yielded a total of 1118 relevant articles and stories on Ebola virus disease. Each title of the articles was considered in order to identify and classify issues and themes. Articles whose content merely contained the word Ebola, but did not focus on the recent EVD outbreak were excluded.

The research instrument used for the study was a coding sheet with themes created inductively by reviewing sample articles. The coding system adopted involved first recording title of newspaper, themes under which articles will be classified, frequency of occurrence and percentage of themes. Some articles covered more than one theme, hence the total frequency of themes is higher than number of articles.

### Data Analysis

Data collected with the use of coding sheet was analyzed using quantitative method. The analysis was descriptive in nature using tables, frequency counts and percentages.

**Table 1** Themes covered by 1118 articles from three widely read newspapers, from July – October, 2014

| Themes   | n   | %    |
|--|-----|------|
| Outbreak of EVD in West Africa (Cases of EVD in West Africa)   | 156 | 14   |
| Cases of EVD in Nigeria (Those who contracted EVD in Nigeria or foreigners who came into the country with EVD) | 270 | 24.1 |
| Death Rates in Nigeria (Number and rate of death from the EVD scourge)   | 96  | 9    |
| Government/Institutional measures and response   | 271 | 24.2 |
| Transportation and movement issues (screenings at borders, seaports and airports)                              | 122 | 11   |
| Misconceptions ( Myths and superstitious beliefs about EVD)  | 108 | 10   |
| Preparedness ( Level of preparedness among health workers and institutions)                                    | 141 | 12.6 |
| Fear, panic and anxiety  | 173 | 15.5 |
| Involvement/responses of other countries, international and Non Governmental agencies (What they did to help)  | 136 | 12.2 |
| Cases in other countries (Outside West Africa)   | 66  | 6    |
| Risk to health care workers  | 105 | 9.4  |
| Issues on vaccines and drugs   | 145 | 13   |
| Funding (Funds needed or provided to fight EVD)  | 93  | 8.3  |
| Public enlightenment (Precautions that the citizenry can take to prevent EVD)                                  | 230 | 20.1 |
| Discrimination   | 75  | 6.7  |
| Treatment and control (Cases of recovery from EVD)   | 185 | 16.5 |
| Effects of EVD on economy  | 54  | 4.8  |
| Commendations on the role of the media   | 129 | 11.5 |

From the newspapers examined from July to October, 2014, 1118 articles were published regarding Ebola virus disease in Nigeria. As shown in table 1, the

most common theme was coverage of Government/Institutional measures and response (24.2%), followed by cases of EVD in Nigeria (24.1%).

Others are public enlightenment (20.1%), treatment and control (16.5%), fear, panic and anxiety (15.5%), cases of EVD in West Africa (14%), issues on vaccines and drugs (13%) and so on. Of importance to this study is

coverage of commendations on the role of the media which recorded 11.5%.

**Table 2** Illustrative quotes from the six most common themes and commendations on the impact of the media

| Theme  | Illustrative Quotes   |
|--|---|
| Government/Institutional measures and response | "Govt efforts on Ebola disease lauded". The Guardian, August 21, 2014,p.3       |
| Cases of EVD in Nigeria                        | "Ebola infected nurse escapes to Enugu". Vanguard, August 14, 2014,p.5          |
| Public enlightenment                           | "The ethics of Ebola." The Guardian, September 15, 2014,p.16                    |
| Treatment and control                          | "Ebola: wife of late doctor discharged." Vanguard, September 9, 2014,p.9        |
| Fear, panic and anxiety                        | "Anxiety mounts over Ebola". The Guardian, August 8,2014,p.27                   |
| Cases of EVD in West Africa                    | "Fears grow over Ebola's spread in West Africa". Vanguard, October 11,2014, p.6 |
| Commendations on the role of the media         | "Ebola Victory Day" The Punch, October 20, 2014,p.83                            |

Table 2 shows samples of quotations to illustrate six most common themes and commendations on the impact of the media.

**Table 3** Total number of article per newspaper

| Newspaper    | Frequency (Percentage) |
|--------------|------------------------|
| The Guardian | 430 (38.5%)            |
| The Punch    | 382 (34.2%)            |
| Vanguard     | 306 (27.3%)            |
| Total        | 1118 (100%)            |

Table 3 shows the frequency of articles on EVD that appeared on each of the newspapers during the period. *The Guardian* had the highest frequency of 430 (38.5%), followed by *The Punch*, 384 (34.2%) and *Vanguard*, 306 (27.3%)

**Table 4** Sources/authors of articles per newspaper

|                                | The Guardian | The Punch  | Vanguard   | Combined Total |
|--------------------------------|--------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| Sources                        | Frequency    | Frequency  | Frequency  | Frequency      |
| WHO/United Nations             | 53 (12%)     | 40 (10.4%) | 42 (13.7%) | 135 (12.1%)    |
| Ministry of Health             | 36 (8.4%)    | 48 (12.6%) | 32 (10.5%) | 116 (10.4%)    |
| Other Government Officials     | 21 (5.1%)    | 23 (6%)    | 26 (8.5%)  | 70 (6.3%)      |
| Victims of EVD                 | 8 (1.9%)     | 7 (1.8%)   | 4 (1.3%)   | 19 (1.7%)      |
| Individuals                    | 34 (7.9%)    | 35 (9.2%)  | 30 (9.8%)  | 99 (8.9%)      |
| Medical Experts                | 127 (29.5%)  | 89 (23.3%) | 59 (19.3%) | 275 (24.6%)    |
| Newspaper Reporters/Editorials | 88 (20.5%)   | 86 (22.5%) | 48 (15.7%) | 222 (19.9%)    |
| Health Institutions            | 29 (6.7%)    | 24 (6.3%)  | 21 (6.9%)  | 74 (6.6%)      |
| Corporate Bodies/ Agencies     | 22 (5.2%)    | 16 (4.2%)  | 24 (7.8%)  | 62 (5.5%)      |
| Pharmaceutical Companies       | 12 (2.8%)    | 14 (3.7%)  | 20 (6.5%)  | 46 (4%)        |
| Total                          | 430 (100%)   | 382 (100%) | 306 (100%) | 1118 (100%)    |

Table 4 reveals that the highest source of EVD articles published in newspapers during the period was from medical experts, 275 (24.6%), followed by reporters/editorials, 222 (19.9%), while WHO/United

Nations accounted for 135 (12.1%) articles. The least source was from victims of EVD, 19 (1.7%)

### Discussion of Findings

This study was conducted to analyze newspaper coverage of the Ebola Virus Disease epidemic between July and October, 2014 in Nigeria, with the intention of determining the role of the media in the prevention and eradication of the disease in the country. The media as communication channels are very important in public awareness campaigns, eradication of fears and misconceptions (Love, Amesen and Phillips, 2014). This is evident in the informational frame with which newspaper stories examined were presented – to create awareness and knowledge necessary to take action. The study revealed that 230 articles of the newspapers' coverage on EVD were focused on public enlightenment. The importance of public awareness in the outbreak of an epidemic like EVD cannot be overemphasized. A lack of public awareness can lead to confusion, fear and misconceptions that may lead to adoption of practices and protocols that may expose the citizenry to risks and worse case scenarios. However, beyond the creation of awareness, the study discovered as shown in table 4, that many of the stories emanated from medical experts (275, representing 24.6%) who could use appropriate medical frame to provide a strong theme of empowerment for readers. Table 4 further revealed that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations were also sources of articles on EVD during the period (135, representing 12.1%). Many of these articles were centered on measures to be adopted by people in order to prevent the spread of the disease. Baran and Davis (2009) and Uwom and Oloyede (2014) noted that health measures advocated by medical experts through media reports could influence opinions and behavior of people. These newspaper stories would have contributed to creating necessary awareness and influencing people to quickly adopt specified prevention measures, which in the long run helped to stop the further spread of the disease.

The Nigerian public was concerned about the spread of the deadly disease and measures being taken by various stakeholders especially the Government to curb the escalations. The study showed that newspaper articles centered more on cases of EVD (270) in the country and Government responses and measures (271). Though public rating of the performance of the Nigerian Government on economic issues has declined in recent years, its response to EVD epidemic has been applauded locally and internationally (Sifferlin, 2014). Newspaper reports showed that both Federal and State Governments collaborated with health experts and organisations like the World Health Organization to provide public awareness, isolation centres for treatment and monitoring of victims and suspected cases. 93 articles covered funding. An analysis of the articles

revealed that funding for fighting the epidemic came principally from the Federal Government, while State Governments, non governmental agencies, individuals and the World Health Organization gave appreciable assistance. Ovuore (2014) reported that the Federal Government released an initial estimate of \$11million at the beginning of the epidemic.

Commendations on the role of media coverage in prevention and control of EVD scourge during the period, was also highlighted in the articles covered. Table 1 showed that 129 articles covered commendations on the role of the media. The commendations came from prominent personalities including health professionals, religious and political leaders. The media played a great role in public awareness campaigns that helped to prevent the spread of the disease (Adeyemi, 2014). The impact of newspapers was felt more in urban areas where majority of the population was literate. Incidentally, the EVD epidemic occurred in the urban cities of Lagos and Port Harcourt.

### Limitation of the Study

The study has a limitation of using newspapers alone to examine the coverage of EVD epidemic in the media. Other media like television, radio and social networks were not examined and analyzed. Also, the study made use of three newspapers, out of approximately 20 print newspapers in Nigeria. The findings may not be generalized for all EVD articles in Nigerian media.

### Conclusion

In spite of observed limitations, the study revealed that the media in general and newspapers in particular created the needed awareness to deal with the EVD epidemic in Nigeria. Newspapers served as channels through which important healthcare information on prevention of EVD was disseminated to the public.

The media can serve as important sources of empowerment and direction in cases of health emergencies. In intellectual discourse of how Nigeria overcame the EVD scourge, the role of the media cannot be ignored. It is hoped that both Federal and State Governments in Nigeria would continually take advantage of the media in creating awareness and dealing with issues relating to public health. Media practitioners should remain at the fore front of disseminating health information that would help society develop and maintain the culture of good hygiene and healthy living

### Ethical Issues and Future Research

The study could not use human subjects as part of the research because of current stigmatization and superstitious beliefs about EVD among Nigerians.

The authors, who are part of a research cluster, hope to do a follow up study in future using human subjects when issues of stigmatization would be less prevalent.

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