

Health journalism in Nigeria: An evaluation of health news coverage amongst selected national dailies

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Abstract

This is a content analytical research indulging social statistical measures and evaluation of possible disparities amongst four Nigerian national dailies' quantitative coverage of local, international and foreign health news. The research determines the extent and nature of local, international and foreign health news coverage. Hinged on Development Media Theory for non-empirical perspective, this research advances pivotal attention towards strategic allocation of media space to health news from Nigeria. Four Nigerian national dailies were purposively considered and systematically sampled with an interval of 4:1. Test result indicates improving but still low local health news among three of the four newspapers –showing some significant disparities. International proximate locations of health news are overall higher in terms of percentage coverage than local health news, while foreign health news coverage is the least covered in all the four dailies –as expected. There should be more development communication research based on news analyses along proximate news locations considered herein, as well as better health-news space allocation aided by relevant advanced computer software -which will enable algorithm based inherent news categories and relative news dissemination.

Key Words: Health News; Development Communication; Proximate News Locations; Nigerian Health Media

Introduction

Nigeria as a sovereign nation has acknowledged through its various policies and laws, the importance and implications of health to national development. The health sector in Nigeria is structured around the three tiers of government for effective implementation of qualitative and functional health care systems. This also implies that the federal, state, and local governments of Nigeria control the health system of all health institutions both public and private. However in spite of the numerous efforts and understanding by all stakeholders that health is a very important issue in Nigeria, literature abound of the abysmal and hopeless nature of the health system in Nigeria (Agudosy,2012; Adebayo, 2014; Ejim, 2014).

Thus, according to Eme; Uche, and Uche (2014) the health sector in Nigeria is deeply fragmented, with only a small fraction of the

healthcare coming from a unified and organized centre. The health ministry provides policies and regulations meant to guide the implementation of healthcare, but this is mostly bureaucratic posturing that gets lost as you go down to the core of healthcare practices in Nigeria. Nigeria is presently facing an epidemiological transition with the increasing emergence of non-communicable diseases (NCD) while communicable diseases (CD) remain the major causes of morbidity and mortality (WHO, 2010).

The management of any health care system [if it is to be successful] should be typically directed through a set of policies and plans adopted by the government, private sector business and other groups in areas such as personal health care delivery and financing,

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pharmaceuticals, health human resources and public health (Eme et al, 2014). Nigerians of all social status face the intractable and excruciating paucity of health issues, programs, facilities, manpower and technology that could save Nigerian citizens from avoidable and untimely deaths and incapacitations. Many factors are responsible for these problems: poor health education of citizens, lack of sensitization of the public on health and health care issues, poor or non-existent health facilities, fake and substandard drugs, hazardous environments, poor life styles, government inability to provide affordable and functional health facilities and policies, lack of effective monitoring of the health professionals and institutions, among others.

In view of the foregoing, and in the light of development communication, the media in Nigeria is to constructively report the aforementioned challenges. This means giving more attention to proximate health news locations. The media is a very important socialization agency. Media is arguably the most important channel of disseminating information that could be useful to the general public. Perhaps the media could do a lot to change the different perspectives of the health problems encountered in Nigeria today. This is because the media is very crucial to the workings of all other social institutions in any given society (McQuail, 2010).

Media should keep up a surveillance of all health issues in Nigeria and provide information towards solutions and policies that could endear good health practices. Correlation of different responses of the environment infers that the media should perform interpretive, analytical information coverage, and not just random reportage of facts. It is to be expected that as information gathering and dissemination is coagulating into smarter niche inclinations, health news coverage and spread across proximate news locations such as local, international, and foreign would become strategic information practice. This research, quite pioneering in the regard of understanding niche media reportage of cogent development issues such as health, therefore, stems from the foregoing. At this stage of proximate media information locations research, it may suffice to attempt an understanding how conventional information entities such as national dailies

consider health as significant development issues in Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

Health is undoubtedly one of the important categories of development (Eme et al, 2014). In Nigeria, health is a major concerns as well as (Muhammad, Abdulkareem, and Chowdhury, 2017). It is the reason health communication research is vital. Indeed, several media and communication studies have been conducted on varied health care delivery and issues such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, Ebola virus disease outbreak, maternal mortality, cancer, nutrition, poliomyelitis, hypertension, heart diseases, yellow fever, exercise/obesity among others. Other studies have looked at health interventions by government at various levels as may relate to aspects such MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]/SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] (Odozi and Nyam, 2014). Odoemelam, Onumadu and Arua (2014, p.190) for instance looked at the media coverage of HIV/AIDS –surprisingly revealing “low number of news report on HIV/AIDS” even as the period of study included the time of Worlds AIDS day. While the study also investigated the health news distributions among [only] five news categories, the proximate geographical spread was not included.

Similarly, Onyeizu and Binta (2014) sought to understand the level of prominence given to health issues reported in the *Guardian* and *The Punch* newspapers; the sources of the health stories; the type health issues covered; as well as the form (news, features and editorial) of the reports. Batta (2012) on the other hand studied extent of press coverage of traditional medical practice in Nigeria, the inherent prominence of such coverage, the frames of reports, the formats as well as the dominant issues thereof, but did not examine the quantitative disparity of health news coverage amidst other news categories. This is also the case with Abana (2017) who did a study on maternal health reportage in selected Nigerian newspapers. Furthermore, Odorume(2015) basically profiled the relationship between development communication and selected imperatives towards a healthy Nigeria; while Johnson, Layefa and Taiwo (2016) only specifically studied newspaper coverage of the 2014 ebola virus disease outbreak in Nigeria –looking at the extent and slant of coverage. Considering

article counts on hypertension in Nigeria, the space, location, story type, as well as source, Okpoko, and Aniwada (2017) also did not investigate the quantitative proximate locations' spread of such coverage.

Though there is seems to be impressive health development communication research from Nigeria, paucity persist in terms of scholarly interest towards overall profiling of the quantitative disparities of health news amongst several national dailies in terms of the proximity-spread [as a news determinant]. Most studies look at one health issue at a time. Besides, only few studies such as Odoemelam et al, (2014, p.190) have studied health news distributions among [only] five news categories. Without modest research efforts such as this, it may become difficult to draw the combined attention of health news makers amidst other development concerns. Moreover, there is the need to stimulate ideation towards strategic news categories consideration and relative application of algorithm dependent newspaper information delivery systems -development information profiling currently appears to lack such media sophistication, and such also forms part bases for this research.

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant disparity amongst Nigerian national dailies' quantitative coverage of local, international and foreign health news?
2. To what extent is there disparity in the overall Nigerian national dailies' local, international and foreign health news coverage?
3. What is the ranking of Nigerian national dailies' health news coverage amidst other news categories?

Conceptual Review: Health, Journalism and Health Journalism

Health has been defined by various researchers and organizations. There is no generally accepted concept of health but most of the portrayals of health stipulate that health is much more than the absence of disease. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2009). Though this definition of health by WHO is disputed by some scholars, the arguments may delve into rhetoric or semantics if further pursued. One

thing that is clear though is that such a definition underlines the importance of health to any individual. Health can be conceptualised as the totality of a human person's spiritual, physical, social, emotional or psychological, economic, educational and environmental wellbeing. This conception though idealistic can be achieved if optimum use of human intelligence, potentials, technology is put into social and existential realities of the human person.

This is evidenced by the fact that government of many nations of the world set aside huge funds in research on health issues so as to ameliorate health and healthcare problems and the incorporation of basic insurance systems to mitigate challenges that may accrue as a result of affordable health issues. This is because no nation can develop above the health and healthcare system of its citizens. Indeed, health is an important aspect of both physical and human development. Journalism on the other hand refers to the production and distribution of reports on recent events. Journalists hold themselves to a certain code of ethics and they make very important decisions when reporting news to different publics.

Nigerian citizens depend on journalists to report issues objectively, accurately, fairly and truthfully and also to maintain an unbiased and impartial opinion. Journalists as fourth estate of the realm and watchdogs of the society perform professional civic duty; provide information to the public so that they can form their opinion on basic issues in life. Therefore, journalism is a very important aspect of media in Nigeria.

So far, it seems a fair percentage of Nigerians get information from journalists based on different platforms available to them. The print media is one of the easily accessible means of communication in Nigeria. Journalism is a very important means of information dissemination which can help to solve the health issues in Nigeria. Health journalism then is an aspect of media experience that is important to healthcare delivery system of any nation. Health journalism is growing and it is important to note that many people [inclusive of Nigerians] depend on information they get from the media such as newspapers to function properly in the society.

Accurate journalistic, but much more, strategic reporting is indispensable to guarantee that the masses are aware of what information spreads in relation to where they leave, and have a life. Thus health journalism plays a very vital

role in the Nigeria health care system. There have been instances where media houses in Nigeria dedicate time and space for health related issues. Many Newspapers report health related issues based the allocation of relevance.

It is arguable, however, that the Nigerian health journalists do not painstakingly report or cover health issues in Nigeria. This is evident in the degree of health issues that accrue in Nigeria society. There is need therefore for a very comprehensive analyses and evaluation of health news as is being covered by Nigerian newspapers. It is believed that journalists can use their position to frame health news in such a way that health policies and people's attitude to health issues should change.

Local health news coverage is indeed encouraged. International health news, which is seen herein as news concerning, relating to and or involving Nigeria/Nigerian interests, is hence expected to juxtapose local health news, but not dominate. Such health proximate health news locations are vital towards understanding how much the Nigerian media have considered the health reality in the country. The third proximate news local -Foreign health news [news not concerning, relating to and or involving Nigeria/Nigerian interests] would then become basically informational, and not profiled in tandem with Nigeria's national health development scheme.

Empirical Review

In a study titled "Development Journalism and Press Coverage of Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria" by Odozi and Nyam (2014), purposively looked at the Punch, The Guardian, and The Nation [three among some 20 national dailies in Nigeria]. The researchers question the extent Nigerian journalists reports development issues; the reportorial style [straight forward news or in-depth news analysis of inherent issues] generally preferred by the journalists; and what Millennium Development Goals are covered in the selected dailies. The Development Media Theory was also adopted in that study.

Via quantitative content analysis, findings suggested that journalists in Nigeria do report MDGs but more in straight news than interpretative/in-depth reportorial style -which implied less attention to standards for development news coverage. Also, health related goals were less covered, compared to goals such as environmental sustainability and

poverty eradication. This means economy [wealth came before health].

Having agreed that "one of the key aspects of the development potential of the mass media is health communication", Onyeizu and Binta (2014, p.83) did another research. Through a quantitative purposive investigation, The Guardian and The Punch newspapers yet again were chosen [based on AMPS 2010 newspaper readership data -as cited by the researchers]. Within a 24-month time frame, 554 health reports were analysed. Findings showed that among other selected health issues, HIV/AIDS was the leading health item reported. Generally, health did not get prominent [front page] coverage.

The study also adopted Development Media Theoretical perspective as part of its frame, and recommended better [diverse] and more prominent coverage of health news. It is in the light of such findings that this study delves at spread of health news amongst other development issues towards understanding the priority ratings and inherent proximate news locations thereof. Perhaps, four years on, from the previous studies, and a diverse approach, within a particular time, and among vast development issues [several news categories], one may have a clue about the progress made in health coverage in Nigeria, or otherwise. Even then, the question of local news interest, which implies development theorem mind-set, above distant news coverage, stand to be understood herein.

Theoretical Review

This research draws from the theoretical perspective of development media. The theory was first mentioned by Dennis McQuail, in 1987. This was at the heels of the four normative theories, which did not directly address the peculiar media situations of countries, such Nigeria. According to McQuail (2010), the media developing countries can only help better by emphasising the situation on ground instead of blindly following [in a strict sense], the normative theorisation already hitherto in use. The idea was predicated on the ground that there could be no meaningful development in any society if the inherent media are not development driven. This in turn would mean profiling issues in the light and hope of achieving positive change.

As such, the theory hints how the media in developing nationals, via free but conscientious

development information posturing, can and should influence positive change and or fight it. While the theory serves a useful guide for what to expect from media in countries such as Nigeria, the assumption also provides a bases for government interference in the affairs of the media in countries such as Nigeria, often citing what Anaeto et al, (2008, p.63) call “development interest(s)”.

Due to the assumptions of the Development Theory, it may readily suffice to expect a robust coverage of issues such as health. Besides, a health nation is most likely to become a wealthy one. In summary, the theory provides the ground for profiling pragmatic development imperatives in Nigeria. With such a theoretical perspective, it become reasonable to assume that the media coverage of categories such as health would readily serve as an insight into the relative rating of health amongst national dailies in Nigeria. This theory therefore forms the bases for applauding or berating some level of Nigerian media coverage of health –especially, as concerned the role of national dailies. The development performance [quantitative disparity] amongst the selected national dailies, the spread of health news coverage across proximate news locations thereof, and the ranking of health news amidst other news categories in this study stands justified, and appreciated.

Method of Study

This research is both exploratory and descriptive. By attempting to instigate attention in development communication such as health, but from an angle not quite common before now, this study fulfils the affirmation to exploratory research mentioned by Babbie (2005). However, the research, being a content analysis of four national dailies in Nigeria, the study also succeeds at describing niche perspectives to health news coverage in Nigeria. Wimmer and Dominic (2011, p.158) speak to the nature of descriptive studies, noting the valuable contributions of such research approach have made to understanding the media and effects thereof.

The selected national dailies were Daily Sun, The Guardian, Vanguard, and The Punch. The newspapers were purposively considered. First, the newspapers were reputable and are national dailies (Nigerian Press Council, 2009); second, the newspapers were readily available for recording of manifest contents. Besides, the

newspapers were purchased directly from the vendors in order to avoid depending on other potentially unreliable newspaper delivery avenues -a situation that could otherwise truncate the data gathering process. This approach is indeed given credence by Keyton (2011, p.6).

The entire process of content analysis systematic, and took place within three months –the first quarter of 2018. Therein, each edition was considered as a potential sample. Nevertheless, a sampling interval of 4:1 was indulged towards better management of 19 content analysis categories. –from which “health/Welfare” was one. Besides, the study selected four newspapers, which meant a ratio of 4:4 [in every four days, four national dailies were considered, but within the same sampling interval].

Moreover, health news was weighed against such content coverage and spread, as well as proximate news locations [local, international, and foreign]. The entire method therefore yielded 21 editions for each of the national daily, within the three months of study –starting from 8th of January, 2018; this means 21 editions x 4 newspapers = 84 editions. The categories of analysis were the news contents [wherein the units of analysis were the 19 news classifications found in the news texts and relative/accompanying formats such as pictorials, graphs, maps, charts, cartoons] and proximate news locations [wherein the units of analysis where the implied or applied proximate location the news contents related to or emerged from; such include local news, international news –health news involving/concerning Nigeria and any other nation(s), and foreign news –health news not involving/concerning Nigeria, but only other nation(s)].

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to ascertain the internal validity and reliability of the study. This was via a test-retest situation of two pilot coding results, with a rating of 0-5 each. The r was 0.6. Buda and Jarynowski (2010) attuned to such a Pearson Product-Moment score, noting how such falls within a reasonable Coefficient in the social sciences. Nevertheless, care was still taken towards elimination of possible content coding bias.

Results and Discussion

Data is hereunder presented, and discussed in relation to the research questions.

Table 1: Health News in Selected Nigerian Dailies According to Proximate News Locations

Sources	Health News According to Proximate News Locations								
	Local News			International News			Foreign News		
	Total	Frequency	%	Total	Frequency	%	Total	Frequency	%
Daily Sun	1,369	59	4.3	208	11	5.2	83	11	1.2
The Guardian	1,652	116	7.0	273	37	3.6	143	18	12.6
Vanguard	1,794	78	4.3	276	11	4.0	248	4	1.7
The Punch	1,323	73	5.6	230	11	4.8	178	7	4.0

*Total = Overall Total Coverage

As shown in table 1 the health news spread is just one among 19 news categories examined. By implying a hypothetical /theoretically balanced news categories' spread, each of the 19 news categories would earn percentile coverage of 5.2% [100%/19]. This means the local health news coverage of Daily Sun and Vanguard is below par. Both newspapers only had 4.3% coverage of local health news.

While Daily Sun improved in terms of international health news coverage, Vanguard and The Punch dropped even further. The Guardian is the only newspaper that was

consistently above the implied 5.2% health news coverage mark –even in terms of foreign health news coverage.

This finding sort of confirms the research by Onyeizu and Binta (2014) who noted that health has not been getting prominent [front page] coverage. This study [which did not just look at prominence, but went further to consider and investigate the entire health news coverage in the four Nigerian national dailies] has largely confirmed that health news coverage, though improving, is still insufficiently covered by some prominent media entities in Nigeria.

Table 2: Health News and Hypothetical Test of Relative Proximate Location Disparities

Sources	Local Health News Disparities and Results of Test of Hypothesis			
	%	X ²	Probability Value [P]	Rendition
Daily Sun	4.3	4.7	<0.05	Significant Difference
The Guardian	7.2	2.3	>0.05	No Significant Difference
Vanguard	4.3	4.7	<0.05	Significant Difference
The Punch	5.6	3.4	>0.05	No Significant Difference
Sources	International Health News Disparities and Results of Test of Hypothesis			
	%	X ²	Probability Value	Rendition
Daily Sun	5.2	3.8	>0.05	No Significant Difference
The Guardian	13.6	0.4	>0.05	No Significant Difference
Vanguard	4	5.0	<0.05	Significant Difference
The Punch	4.8	4.0	<0.05	Significant Difference
Sources	Foreign Health News Disparities and Results of Test of Hypothesis			
	%	X ²	Probability Value	Rendition
Daily Sun	1.2	9.9	<0.05	Significant Difference
The Guardian	12.6	0.6	>0.05	No Significant Difference
Vanguard	1.7	8.8	<0.05	Significant Difference
The Punch	4	5.0	<0.05	Significant Difference

Proximate Locations	Proximate Health News Location Disparities and Results of Test of Hypothesis			
	%	X ²	Probability Value [P]	Rendition
Local	5.3	3.7	>.05	No Significant Difference
International	7.0	2.6	>.05	No Significant Difference
Foreign	4.9	4.0	<.05	Significant Difference

*DF [Degree of Freedom = 1]

To further attempt answering the question of whether there is significant disparity among Nigerian national dailies' quantitative coverage of local, international and foreign health news data is displayed in table 2. Based on theoretical [expected] 20% allocation of news space to health information, the actual health news coverage [local, international, and foreign] of the Nigerian dailies were subjected to chi square contingency test.

Results showed [as corroborated in table 1] that The Guardian newspapers' local, international, and foreign health news coverage stood out, and was not significantly different from even a theoretical value of 20% health news coverage. At DF 1, P-Value of 0.05, it may be observed that the X² result for The Guardian climbed along the level of the newspapers coverage [X²=2.3 for 7.2% of local health news coverage; X² = 0.4 for 13.6% international health news coverage; and X²=0.6 for 12.6% of foreign health news coverage] – showing there is no significant disparity between 20% theoretical health news coverage [which would be deemed enormous] and that of The Guardian's local, international, and foreign health news reportage.

Other than the foregoing, and with an expected balanced health spread of 5.2%, The Punch did not do badly with 5.6% local health news coverage. Indeed X² = 3.4 [though slightly left with 0.4 to be above the acceptable probability level of 0.38 -at DF 1, and P-Value of 0.05], which is not significantly different from a theoretical value of 20%. To put this in perspective, if health news coverage across all three proximate news locations was 20% each, the other 18 news categories [as shown Table 1: Inherent content analysis format] would have to settled for an average of 4.4% each. Therefore the test result of The Punch, though close [by +0.4] to been significantly different from a theoretical value of 20% coverage, is otherwise reasonable. The result of the test for Daily Sun [X² = 3.8 for international health news coverage

at 5.2% of the expected balanced health news spread -if all 19 news categories were evenly spread] is classic of the improvement of Daily Sun's international health news coverage.

Generally, all the newspapers, except The Guardian [As noted earlier] did not significantly cover foreign health news. This means, there is significant disparity in the local health news quantitative coverage of Daily Sun and Vanguard; significant disparity in the international news quantitative coverage of Vanguard and The Punch. Only Guardian, which even had higher local health news coverage, also did significant foreign health news coverage. Given that three out of the four Nigerian national dailies, nevertheless had less disparity in respective quantitative coverage of local and international health news, when compared to foreign health news coverage, the overall health news disposition conforms to the assumptions and estimation of the Development Theory proposed by McQuail (2010).

As noted in the response to research question 1, three of the Nigerian national dailies studied -besides The Guardian, did not significantly cover foreign health news. In relation to research question 2, quantitative tests of average inherent disparities of health news proximate locations indicate there is no significant difference between the overall local and international health news coverage of the four Nigerian national dailies that were studied. With an expected balanced spread of 5.2% across the 19 news categories, test results show that X² = 3.7 for 5.3% local health news coverage, and 2.6 for 7.0% international health news coverage. Both local and international health news coverage = No Significant Difference with even theoretical value of 20% health news coverage across 18 other news categories.

The foregoing once again conforms to the expectations of the Development Media theory articulated by proposed by McQuail (2010). As indicated, the overall local and international

health news coverage among the selected Nigerian national dailies is a lot higher than foreign health news. The expected media role towards Nigeria's health development is hence tilting to a positive direction. This opposes the scepticism of Anaeto et al (2008) about the role of development communication outlook for issues such as health. Nevertheless, the

international health news coverage, in turn, is higher than local health news coverage. This is a depressing outcome. This is because such data [an average of 7.0% international health news coverage in Nigeria versus an average of 5.3% local health news coverage] proves the need for improvement among Nigeria journalists towards local health news coverage in Nigeria.

Table 3: Ranking of Health News

Sources	Local			International			Foreign			
	Total	F	Rank	Total	F	Rank	Total	F	%	Rank
Daily Sun	1,369	59	10 th	208	1	4 th	83	11	1.2	10 th
The Guardian	1,652	116	5 th	273	3	3 rd	143	18	12.6	2 nd
Vanguard	1,794	78	10 th	276	1	4 th	248	4	1.7	6 th
The Punch	1,323	73	6 th	230	1	5 th	178	7	4.0	3 rd

*F: Frequency

Data in table 3 is displayed in order to answer research question 3. Consequently, data indicated that across the 19 news categories that were analysed –and so along three delineated proximate news locations [local, international, and foreign], The Guardian [just as shown in the test results] did better than Daily Sun, Vanguard, and The Punch. However, just as interpreted in the answers to research question 1 and 2, the Nigerian national dailies, generally, did better in terms of international health news coverage than local health news [health information that is closest to Nigeria and Nigerians].

Nevertheless, health news, across 18 other news categories, is ranked between 5rd to 10th overall in terms of local health news; 3rd to 5th overall in terms of international health news; and 2nd to 6th overall in terms of foreign health news –beside the 10th overall foreign health news coverage of Daily Sun. This sort aligns with the fear expressed by Odozi and Nyam (2014). The duo hitherto questioned the extent to the reportorial approach Nigerian journalists towards development issues in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Considering local, international, and foreign health news coverage, this study concluded that only The Guardian did a better news reportorial job on health. However, the newspapers generally gave more attention to health news

concerning or involving Nigeria, than otherwise. This is shown in the average health news coverage across the three proximate news locations –local, international, and foreign.

Though this research did not study the slants of health news coverage, an average 7.0% international health news coverage in Nigeria shows that health issues/event/incidents between Nigeria and other nations and extended entities are getting more equivalent news categories attention.

As far as development communication may be concerned, it is not enough to examine the quantitative media contents' coverage and or spread. Rather, it is even more revealing to weigh [take into account] the spread across proximate news locations in order to get a better perspective of equivalent space values amongst space-competing news categories.

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