Television News Coverage of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: Missed Opportunities to Promote Health Due to Ownership and Politics

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Abstract
This study examined Television news coverage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria from February 2020 to July 2020. The focus was on African Independent Television (AIT), a privately owned TV, and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), a government-owned TV. We also interviewed (n = 30) participants to understand their view on media coverage of the pandemic. We found that the TV stations paid adequate attention to the issues of COVID-19. However, the private media allocated more prominence to the coverage of COVID-19. By implication, the private media had more COVID-19 stories telecasted on its headline which also appeared as the first headline in many cases. Furthermore, they had more stories that were aired 61 seconds and above. The findings also showed that the government media outlet cited more of government officials while the private media duelled more on the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The private media had more negative tone stories, and most of its stories used visual and motion footages. Overall, our findings suggest that media ownership and politics play a large role in the coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria. This has affected the attitude of the public as many of them no longer see the pandemic as something serious, but rather politically motivated virus to highlight the failings of the political party in power.

Keywords
COVID-19, health education, media coverage, media ownership, Nigeria, pandemic, politics

Introduction and Background
The severity of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has driven the World Health Organization to brand it as a global pandemic which has claimed many lives, raising widespread panic and adding to the anxiety of people (Zhou et al., 2020). As the effort to create COVID-19 vaccine continues, there is a need for the public to get adequate health literacy and information that would help in curtailing the spread of the virus. And one way to get this is through the media. The media are mandated with the fundamental role of educating, creating awareness, and informing the public during pandemic (Gever & Ezeah, 2020). It has been suggested that the media should be an educator during a pandemic, inferring that the media should educate the public regarding health issues so that they could be mentally equipped regarding behavior that leads to preventing the spread of a pandemic (Flora et al., 1989; Hanitzsch et al., 2019). According to Gever and Ezeah (2020), the most suitable way the media contribute to creating awareness and educating the masses during a pandemic is through coverage. This is implemented via regular reporting public health issues, suggesting appropriate health behavior, and recommending policies that will help in curtailing the spread of a pandemic.

Apuke and Tunca (2019) contend that the media can perform its role through the high frequency of coverage, prominence/depth of coverage, news, and visual framing as well as tone. Through agenda setting and framing, the media can make an epidemic important enough to warrant a policy intervention. Msughter and Phillips (2020) emphasized that media framing is the process by which an issue is portrayed in the news media. News and visual framing deals with the way the media present the issues of COVID-19 through text and visuals. Thus, the way audiences interpret what they are provided with, are products of media framing. Meanwhile, agenda setting premise contends that media filters and shapes what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience. Also, the

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more attention the media gives to an issue, the more likely the public will consider that issue to be important (Borah, 2016). This can be achieved through frequency of coverage (which is the number of times COVID-19 stories were covered), and depth of coverage/prominence (which is the amount of time allocated to the issues of COVID-19). For example, the media could influence people to practice self-protective behavior such as wearing of face mask, social distancing, and regularly washing of hands. Therefore, the degree to which media sets agenda regarding COVID-19, as well as the framing techniques used, would inform the public on the severity of the outbreak (Zhou et al., 2020). An important aspect to consider in framing should be the source of a story, because it has a way of influencing the frames used (Gever et al., 2018). The predominant sources used by a media station affect their slant and framing, which in turn affect how the way people will regard the news (Gever et al., 2018).

Prior studies on media coverage of health issues hardly recognize the role of media ownership and political structure in shaping media reportage. Instead, researchers most often examined how news media report health issues. In this study, we recognize the role media ownership and political structure (Hart et al., 2020), exerts in influencing the agenda setting and framing of the media, which in turn affect how issues are presented to the public (Asogwa et al., 2020). In this view, we used the perspective of the propaganda model to support the agenda setting and framing theory. We first content analyzed Television coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria to realize if media ownership influences frequency of coverage, prominence, news sources, tones, news frames, and visual frames. Then we seek the views of the public regarding media coverage of COVID-19 to enable us to establish if politics is associated with the coverage of the pandemic. We focus on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and African Independent Television (AIT) since they represent the government and private TV stations in Nigeria. Our study’s novelty stems from the fact that several studies have been conducted on the media coverage of COVID-19 and a good number of these studies have been on newspaper coverage of the pandemic (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Msauhter & Phillips, 2020; Nwakpu et al., 2020). However, studies on television coverage are scarce, though the literature is growing (Gever & Ezeah, 2020). Furthermore, prior studies failed to realize how critical aspects such as media ownership, prevalent media system, and political structure affect the coverage of the pandemic. Finally, past researches overrelied on content analysis method to study the issues of the pandemic, neglecting the opinion of the public regarding media coverage of the pandemic.

**Literature Review**

**Media Coverage of Health Crisis**

Studies conducted outside Nigeria that focused on health issues are growing. For example, Bowen (2013) found that media messages convinced Cameroonian to use a treated net to prevent the spread of malaria. This outcome suggests a positive relationship between health media messages and healthy behavior. Contrary to this outcome, another study found that media overconcentration on panic reporting during Ebola outbreak in Ghana increased the fear among the public and health care workers. It also made some to flee from isolation centers, and suspicious patients in dire need of medical attention were abandoned (Iddrisu, 2018). Basch et al. (2014) investigated how three widely read newspapers covered Ebola in the United States. The study found that the media primarily focused on death tolls, with less emphasis on educating the readers on the critical aspect of the Ebola epidemic. With regard to studies conducted in Nigeria, Uwom and Oloyede (2014) studied newspaper coverage of health issues in Nigeria with a focus on the Guardian and Punch newspapers. The study found that even though health issues were well reported in the media, most of the news were reported using straight news format and there was less prominence allocated to the issue of health. Straight news here means stories that report only the most essential information in a concise and impartial manner. Having understood media coverage of health crisis, it is pertinent to specifically look at media coverage of COVID-19 pandemic which is the focus of this study.

**The Media and COVID-19 Pandemic**

Recent evidence has shown that media coverage could be an effective way to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Zhou et al., 2020). Mutua and Oloo Ong’ong’a (2020) studied international news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was on BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, and people’s daily. The results showed that the media played a vital role in providing information on the initial stages of the outbreak, which influenced public perceptions of the disease and contributed to curtailing the spread. This is contrary to Basch et al. (2020) study, which analyzed Google videos from January to February 2020 and found death rates as the most common topic mentioned across all videos. Pertinent information regarding preventive measures received little attention, suggesting that most of the videos missed the chance to encourage and promote coping strategies and health-sustaining behavior. With regard to Nigeria, Gever and Ezeah (2020) investigated media coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria with a focus on TV, Radio, and Newspapers. The study found that the sampled Nigerian media outlets had less emphasis on the issues of COVID-19 before the first case was announced in Nigeria. However, after cases were reported, the media had an upsurge in its interest and reportage.

It should be noted that there are two main types of media in Nigeria, and this includes private and government-owned media. The private media are entirely established by private individuals, while the government media are owned and managed by the government (Dogari et al., 2018). An example of
the private press in Nigeria includes TVC news, AIT, Vanguard newspaper, Tribune newspapers, Daily Trust, Daily Sun, and many more, including online newspapers. At the same time, the government media includes NTA, Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), and so on (Apuke, 2017). Further evidence has shown that in Nigeria, Radio reach more people; however, television is also largely used by a lot of Nigerians with both low and high literacy as well as low and high class (Apuke, 2017).

Theoretical Underpinning, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

This study is based on three theories: agenda setting, framing, and propaganda model. The Agenda Setting theory, proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 (McCombs & Shaw, 2016), has two core assumptions. First, the media filters and shapes what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience. Second, the more attention the media gives to an issue, the more likely the public will consider that issue to be important (Gever & Ezeah, 2020). The media accomplish its agenda setting functions through frequency of coverage and prominence (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Frequency deals with the number of coverage while prominence focus on the placement of stories on headlines and length/duration of time devoted to stories. Drawing from this theory, we formulated the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What is the frequency of the coverage of the COVID-19 by NTA and AIT?

Research Question 2: What is the level of prominence allotted to the coverage of COVID-19 by the sampled TV stations in Nigeria?

The “Propaganda Model” (PM), which was advanced by Herman and Chomsky (1988), suggests that most mainstream media are themselves typically large corporations, “controlled by very wealthy people or by managers who are subject to sharp constraints by owners and other market-profit-oriented forces” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 14). According to Klaehn (2009), the propaganda model assumed that the corporate ownership results in the interests of the ruling class being represented in the mass media. The news media will consistently produce news content that serves the interests of established power. As such, regardless of the role of the media, ownership and political structure affects its operation (Apuke, 2016). For instance, research has shown that ownership of the media has influence on the frequency of coverage (Apuke & Tunca, 2020). Furthermore, Apuke and Tunca (2019) found that the private media allocated more prominence and had more frequency of coverage than the government media. The same study also found that the private media had more stories on its headline compared with the government media. Intrinsically, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The frequency of news coverage of COVID-19 will be greater for AIT than NTA.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): The appearance of COVID-19 stories on the headline will be greater for AIT than NTA.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): The duration of COVID-19 stories will be greater for AIT than NTA.

The framing theory is one of the influential media effect theory which suggests framing does not focus on the amount of coverage but the angle taken (Gever & Ezeah, 2020). This theory was first introduced in 1974 by Goffman (Goffman, 1974). Framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. In doing so, framing promotes a particular problem definition, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993). Framing is achieved through the selection of sources, tone, news, and visual frames (Apuke & Tunca, 2019). Drawing from the framing theory, we formulated the following questions:

Research Question 3: What are the dominant news sources of COVID-19 outbreak in the sampled TV stations?

Research Question 4: What are the tones applied by the sampled TV stations in the coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria?

Research Question 5: What are the news and visual frames used by the sampled TV stations when covering COVID-19 in Nigeria?

According to propaganda model, media ownership influences source selection, media tone, and framing techniques. First, previous studies suggest that the government media frequently rely on government officials and press release (Apuke & Tunca, 2020; Gever et al., 2018). Second, past research found that ownership structure and political context influence the likelihood of positive, neutral, and negative tone in the media (Dunaway, 2013). According to Asogwa et al. (2020), when the media is owned based on commercial interest, the contents will be suited to please advertisers, opposition parties, politicians, and others sponsors. Whereas, when the media is owned by the government it will resonate the interest of the government. Asogwa et al. (2020) also found that government media (NTA) in Nigeria use more of positive tone compare with private media (Channels TV). Third, past research has shown that government media had more government intervention frames than the private media (Apuke & Tunca, 2019). Tobechukwu (2011) found that the content of reports and information conveyed by state-owned media in Nigeria reveals that much attention is given to government and official statements from politicians. This implies that the content of the media serves the interest of the government and the party in power. In this view, Apuke and Tunca (2019) found a significant difference with regard to private and government media treatment of issues in Nigeria.
The same study concludes that the private media use more of visual/motion footages compared with the government media. Similar finding were reported in the study of Apuke and Tunca (2020). Based on these outcomes, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The usage of government officials as news sources will be greater for NTA than AIT.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** The usage of negative tone in the coverage of COVID-19 will be greater for AIT than NTA.

**Hypothesis 5a (H5a):** The usage of government/international body intervention, economical, and political influence frames will be greater for NTA than AIT.

**Hypothesis 5b (H5b):** The usage of visual/motion footages in reporting the issues of COVID-19 will be greater for AIT than NTA.

We extend past research by including people’s insights into understanding the influence of media coverage of COVID-19 pandemic on their behavior and how politics exert its influence through media. According to framing theory, the way an issue is portrayed in the media can have an influence over how it will be perceived and inferred by the audience (Gever, 2019). Frames in the media influence people’s emotions, attitudes, and behaviors toward issues (Borah, 2016). Past research has also established a link between media messages and audience behavioral change (Bowen, 2013). Recent studies have found significant influence of media coverage of COVID-19 on the public (Effiong et al., 2020) and a positive link between news framing of COVID-19 and audience response (Nwakpu et al., 2020). Past studies also suggest that media coverage is associated with politics. For example, Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote (2020) found an association between media coverage and politics. Gever et al. (2018) also claimed that there is a relationship between politics, ownership, and media coverage, which echoes the assumptions of Propaganda Theory. Hart et al. (2020) likewise found that newspaper coverage of COVID-19 is highly politicized in the United States. Drawing from these pieces of literature, we proposed the following research questions and hypotheses:

**Research Question 6:** What do people think about the coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria?

**Hypothesis 6 (H6):** Media coverage COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria will have a positive link with public behavior/attitude toward the pandemic.

**Hypothesis 7 (H7):** Coverage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria will have a positive link with politics.

**Method**

**Research Design**

This study adopted a sequential mixed-method to understand TV coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria. First, we conducted a content analysis (CA) of sampled TV stations NTA and AIT. Second, we carried out a telephone interview with \( n = 30 \) selected participants from the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, to understand the public’s view regarding the coverage of the pandemic and its influence on them. It should be noted that the results of the content analysis were used to inform/develop questions in the interviews. We selected NTA and AIT because they are one of the largest and high coverage networks in Africa. They have a large audience that watch these stations’ programs. Moreover, their news programs attract millions of audience as compared with other stations in Nigeria (Apuke & Tunca, 2019). The coverage period for this study was from February 2020 to July 2020. This period was selected because the first reported COVID-19 case in Nigeria was registered on February 27, 2020 (Ozili, 2020).

**Techniques and criteria for selecting stories and interviewees.** A motif search technique was used to search COVID-19 stories on the TV archives of NTA and AIT. Search keywords included “COVID-19” “COVID-19 outbreak” “Coronavirus” “Coronavirus in Nigeria” “death rates of Coronavirus” “intervention on Coronavirus” “updates on Coronavirus” and “pandemic in Nigeria.” The search in total retrieved 511 news. The manual review, which means scanning through each story to ascertain its headline, videos/pictures, and content resulted in 89 exclusion, leaving a final sample of 422 stories for the study. Reports that merely mentioned COVID-19 and other diseases such as Lassa fever were removed. We did not screen out stories that focused on different parts of the world as this will help us understand if Nigerian media focused more on covering the cases in Nigeria. Our unit of analysis for this study were news stories on COVID-19 found on NTA and AIT archives.

For the interview participants used in this study, purposive and convenience sampling was used to recruit them. This is consistent with one recent study that focused on the effect of COVID-19 in Nigeria (Odii et al., 2020). First, we focused on respondents that are literate and active users of Television in Nigeria. The reason for using literate is because they will give us an accurate account of the situation at hand. Second, we used respondents that were willing to undertake the telephone interview. We contacted 12 research assistants situated in the six zones in Nigeria to enable us to recruit people who will participate in this study. After reaching potential participants, their numbers were retrieved, and a date for the interview was set at their convenience. Each interview took about 3 to 15 minutes to complete, though some exceeded depending on the respondents. A telephone interview was used as it will enable the respondents to speak freely, and during this period of COVID-19, we want to limit facial contact.

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for final analysis. The participants were assured of their confidentiality, and their responses will only be used for research purpose. Gender was put into consideration to
reduce bias in research. Five participants each were recruited from the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, making a total of 30 participants. Of the 30 participants, 55% were male, and 45% were female, and 90% of them had either Degree/Master’s/PhD, respectively. Only 10% told us they had no degree but other certificates such as Diploma, Nigeria Certificate in Education, and Secondary School Certificate. Before the commencement of the interview, the participants were sent via email a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire inquired if media coverage affected their behavior and attitude regarding the pandemic. The question states, “The media coverage on COVID-19 influenced my attitude/behavior to take precautionary measures.” This was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire also inquired of them to state the predominant type of stories on COVID-19 on a category of 2 = politically inclined stories and 1 = non-politically inclined stories. And finally, they were inquired to state the level at which politics affect the coverage of COVID-19. This was rated on 3 = large extent, 2 = medium extent, and 1 = low extent. We used the responses for the questionnaire to test H6 and H7. With regard to the actual interview, we inquired from the participants the following questions:

- Does the media coverage of the COVID-19 influence your perception and overall thinking regarding the pandemic? Did the coverage cause you to act and take precautionary measures?
- Is there any difference regarding media coverage across private and government media? Please could you elaborate on your opinion?
- Do you think the political landscape of Nigeria affects the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic? Please could you elaborate on your opinion?

**Coding Categories**

In this study, the coding categories were operationalized as follows:

**Media.** This could be either NTA or AIT.

**Frequency of coverage.** This is the number of stories covered in the sampled stations within the period of the study.

**Level of prominence.** The level of prominence was checked using two criteria. First, the appearance of stories on the headline and the position of stories in the headline. A report on COVID-19 could be broadcasted as part of the general telecast and not form part of the headlines. If the report is part of the headlines, we checked the position, was it the first, second, third, or subsequent headlines. Second, we also gauged prominence through the seconds allocated to the coverage of each story, which is categorized as the duration of stories.

**News sources.** This included “Other Government Officials (i.e., Ministers, senators, house of representative members and presidential spokespersons)” “The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)” “WHO/United Nations” “society (i.e., citizens, corporate bodies/agencies, and business)” “medical experts (i.e., Virologist)” “victims of COVID-19 (i.e., recovered patients and those in quarantine)” and “health sector (i.e., hospitals, ministry of health, and pharmaceutical companies)”

**Tones applied.** This was the stance of the media organization regarding the stories. This could be negative, positive, or neutral. Negative tones were categorized as alarming stories. A report is positive when it downplays the negative effect of the pandemic, suggesting there is no cause for alarm. Stories were coded as neutral when they contained both perspectives, or when the tone is undecided.

**The news and visual frames used.** The news frames were not predetermined, but rather categorized after understanding the nature of messages in the media. This is called emergent coding technique (Wimmer & Dominick, 2012). The frames are as follows:

- Awareness/mobilization/containment frames: Stories under this category provided awareness and alerted the public on the disease outbreak. It also educated the public on symptoms of the outbreak, modes of transmission, and ways to curtail the spread of the virus such as handwashing, wearing of a mask, and social distancing.
- Political influence frames: These are stories that showed politics surrounding the issues of COVID-19.
- Fatality/severity: This covered stories on those who have contracted COVID-19 in Nigeria or those who are being treated. It also covered stories on the number of death rates from the COVID-19 scourge and risk of treating patients.
- Government and other international body intervention frames: These are stories on the assistance’s government are providing.
- Economic frame: This looked at stories that examined the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the economy of the nation.
- Stigmatization frame: These stories looked at the stigmatization those who contracted the virus are facing.
- Others: These were stories that did not fall under the above-mentioned frames.

**Visual framing.** We also looked at the visual aspect of media representation of the pandemic. This was coded as still images, stock photos/videos, and visual/motion footages. Still images imply pictures without videos used to describe the issues. Stock photos and videos are categorized as photos and videos that have been used previously and are being
reused in a story. Visual and motion footages are real videos that depicted the actual situation of COVID-19, such as patients, hospitals, and isolation centers.

**Intercoder Reliability and Data Analysis**

Two coders were purposefully selected to do the coding for all the stories. Intercoder reliability test was performed by randomly selecting and double coding 20% of the sampled news articles. Cohen’s kappa intercoder reliability test yielded between 0.89 and 0.92 across the categories. Data analysis was done using IBM SPSS Statistics. For data analysis, we used chi-square to test the association between categorical variables. There are two phases of data analysis. First is the testing of hypotheses for content analysis data. The analysis involves “media ownership” (private vs. government) as the independent variable and frequency of coverage,” “appearance of stories on headlines,” “duration of stories,” “TV sources,” “tones,” “news frames,” and “visual frames” as the dependent variables. Second is the testing of hypotheses for interview data. For this phase, the dependent variables were “behaviour/attitude to take COVID-19 precautionary measures” and “the level at which politics affect COVID-19,” while the independent variable was “predominant type of stories on COVID-19.” Finally, all data were presented in the form of tables and figures. On the other hand, the interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically.

**Results**

**The Relative Frequency of the Coverage of the COVID-19 in Nigeria**

In answering RQ1, we examined the frequency of COVID-19 coverage. We found that a total of 422 stories of COVID-19 were covered by the NTA and AIT between February 2020 and July 2020. However, we noticed that more stories focused on Nigeria (n = 295) compared with stories that focused on other countries (n = 127). The private media (56.7%) had more stories than the government media (43.3%) (see Table 1). Furthermore, results statistically established that the frequency of news coverage of COVID-19 was greater in AIT than NTA. This supported H1, $\chi^2(1) = 21.373, p < .001$. This infers that there is an association between ownership and frequency of coverage. The degree of the relationship was determined with the use of coefficient contingency (C) and this yielded C = 0.244, interpreted as 24.4%.

**Level of Prominence Alotted to the Coverage of COVID-19**

This section which answers RQ2 examined the prominence allocated to the issues of COVID-19 in the TV stations. Results indicated that the private media had more COVID-19 stories on its headline (82%) than the government media (55%) (see Figure 1). With regard to the placement of stories in the headline, results established a significant difference in the appearance of COVID-19 stories on AIT and NTA's headline, $\chi^2(4) = 24.781, p < .001$ (see Figure 2). AIT had more stories on its first headline than NTA, suggesting that 75% of AIT’s COVID-19 stories came as the first headline compared with NTA that had more on the third headline (66.7%).

Furthermore, the data in Table 2 showed the duration of stories on COVID-19 across the TV stations. We realized the private media had more stories that were telecasted 61 seconds and above (68.6%). As such, there was a significant difference between the media stations duration of stories on COVID-19 $t(2) = 8.468, p < .001$. We subjected the data in Figure 2 to test H2a. Results supported this hypothesis, $\chi^2(1) = 23.721, p < .001$, which denote that there will be greater COVID-19 stories on the headline of AIT than NTA. Using the data in Table 2, results also supported H2b, $\chi^2(1) = 24.821, p < .001$, which suggest that the duration of COVID-19 stories will be greater for AIT than NTA. Overall, it could be deduced that there is a relationship between media ownership with stories appearing in headlines as well as duration of stories. The degree of the association was determined with the use of coefficient contingency (C) and this yielded C = 0.344, interpreted as 34.4% and C = 0.244, interpreted as 24.4%, respectively.

**Dominant news sources of COVID-19 in the sampled TV stations**

To answer RQ3, Table 3 was computed to determine the sources of media reports on COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The results revealed that NTA which is a government media outlet cited more of government officials (n = 42, 35%), while the private media dueled more on NCDC (n = 62, 35.4%). Using the same data in Table 3, H3 was tested and our results statistically endorsed it, $\chi^2(1) = 12.721, p < .001$, suggesting that the usage of government officials as news sources will be greater for NTA than AIT. By implication,

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**Table 1. Relative Frequencies of COVID-19 Stories.**

| Media outlet | No of stories covered focusing on Nigeria | Frequency (%) | No of stories covered focusing on other countries | Frequency (%) |
|--------------|----------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------|
| NTA          | 120                                    | 40.7          | 55                                            | 43.3          |
| AIT          | 175                                    | 59.3          | 72                                            | 56.7          |
| Total        | 295                                    | 100           | 127                                           | 100           |

Note. NTA = Nigerian Television Authority; AIT = African Independent Television.

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there is an association between media ownership and the use of news sources. We explored the degree of this association using coefficient contingency (C) and this yielded $C = 0.372$ interpreted as 37.2%.

**Tones Applied in the Coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria**

Data in Figure 3 were used to answer RQ4 which examines media tone. We found that of the 295 stories covered on COVID-19, 147 (50%) used a negative tone. Specifically, AIT had more negative tone stories (63%) than NTA (30%). In fact, most of the stories in the private media used negative tone ($n = 111, 63$%), compared with the government media ($n = 36, 30$%). We further subjected our data to test H4 and the results supported this hypothesis, $\chi^2(1) = 19.762, p < .001$, suggesting that the usage of negative tone in the coverage of COVID-19 will be greater for AIT than NTA. As such, this outcome established that a relationship between media ownership and the usage of tone exist. We further checked the degree of the association and the result indicted coefficient (c) of contingency of $C = 0.308$, interpreted as 30.8%.
To answer RQ5, the data in Table 4 and Figure 4 were computed. As shown in Table 4, the media stations had a diverse focus in reportage. The private media focused more on fatality/severity, political influence, and awareness/mobilization/containment frames (67.4%). Whereas the government media paid more attention to government/international body intervention, economical, and political influence frames (65.8%). With this outcome, we tested H5a and the result supported this hypothesis, $\chi^2(1) = 19.762, p < .001$, which infer that the usage of government/international body intervention, economical, and political influence frames will be greater for NTA than AIT. By implication, an association between media ownership and frames was established. The degree of the association was demonstrated coefficient (c) of contingency of $C = 0.208$, interpreted as 20.8%.

With regard to the visual frames, Figure 4 was computed. Most of the stories on AIT used visual and motion footages (72%) compared with NTA that had more of stock photos and videos (34.4%). We sensed that ownership might have contributed to this divergence in reportage; as such, H5b was computed. Results supported H5b, $\chi^2(1) = 24.762, p < .001$, proving that the usage of visual/motion footages in reporting the issues of COVID-19 will be greater for AIT than NTA.

This section answers RQ6. Using the data from the 30 questionnaire sent out to respondents, we tested the association between the media coverage and public attitudes/behavior and found that media coverage of COVID-19 on TV has connection with public attitudes/behavior, $\chi^2(4, N = 30) = 34.835, p < .001$ (see Table 5). This result supported H6. Results also supported H7 which suggest an association between politics and the coverage of COVID-19, $\chi^2(2, N = 30) = 22.724, p < .001$ (see Table 6).

To substantiate the results obtained in Table 5 and 6, we interviewed the same participants. Many of those who were interviewed had the view that Nigerian media have not fared well in the coverage of COVID-19. They felt that politics had engulfed the coverage of the pandemic, resulting to the media stations missing the opportunity to promote health as well as demonstrate the reality surrounding the pandemic in Nigeria. One of the respondents stated that

"The media, most especially government media, had focused more on governmental interventions than proffering solutions to the problem. We believe politics is at play in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The influence of politics has affected the actual health communication functions of the media."

The participants also felt that the private media is being used to fight the government in power. That is, to expose the

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**Table 2. Durations of the COVID-19 Stories Telecasted by the Television Stations.**

| Duration of the stories | Media outlets |
|-------------------------|---------------|
|                         | NTA           | AIT           | Total          |
| Up to 30 seconds        | 62 (51.7%)    | 10 (5.7%)     | 72 (24.54)     |
| Between 31 and 60 seconds | 42 (35%)   | 45 (25.7%)    | 87 (29.5%)     |
| 61 and above            | 16 (13.3%)    | 120 (68.6%)   | 136 (46.1%)    |
| Total                   | **120**       | **175**       | **295**        |

Note. NTA = Nigerian Television Authority; AIT = African Independent Television.

**Table 3. Sources Cited.**

| TV sources                                  | NTA      | AIT      | Total    |
|---------------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| NCDC                                        | 30 (25%) | 62 (35.4%) | 92 (31.2%) |
| Other government officials                  | 42 (35%) | 32 (18.3%) | 74 (25.1%) |
| Health sector (e.g., hospitals, Ministry of Health, pharmaceutical companies, etc) | 12 (10%) | 20 (11.4%) | 32 (10.8%) |
| Medical experts (e.g., virologist)          | 13 (10.8%) | 10 (5.7%) | 23 (7.8%) |
| WHO/United Nations                          | 10 (8.3%) | 15 (8.6%) | 25 (8.5%) |
| Society (citizens, corporate bodies/agencies, business, etc.) | 8 (6.7%) | 17 (9.7%) | 25 (8.5%) |
| Victims of COVID-19 (e.g., recovered patients and those in quarantine) | 5 (4.2%) | 19 (10.9%) | 24 (8.1%) |
| Total                                       | **120**  | **175**  | **295**  |

Note. NTA = Nigerian Television Authority; AIT = African Independent Television; NCDC = Nigeria Centre for Disease Control; WHO = World Health Organization.

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weaknesses of the government in tackling the issues of COVID-19. A respondent remarked that

We suspect that some politicians might be sponsoring the coverage of media to downplay the government in power. I will call this a missed chance on the part of the media to promote healthy practices among the citizens due to political interference. The media especially the private media supposed to focus on sensitization rather than allowing themselves to be used as a tool to fight the government.

According to the interviewees, both media have focused more on economic, political, and the fatality rate of COVID-19, and significant aspect of media performance, which is to educate them is lacking. Specifically, those in the northern part of Nigeria said they do not take COVID-19 serious due to the manner of media reportage. Accordingly, a respondent from the northern part of Nigeria stated that

We now go about our everyday routines and hope for the best in the coming months. We believe media reportage is highly influenced by politics and media ownership; the private media wants to be used to fight the government in power while the government media is used to shield the actual occurrences of the pandemic. The actual role of the media has been neglected in this crucial moment that requires a vibrant media.

Another respondent from the southern part of Nigeria told us that

I hardly take precautionary measures, because the media has not done much in informing me on the best precautionary measures to take.

This view was also shared among the other participants from the other regions of Nigeria. When we asked them to rate between the private and government media, they stated that the private media is still commendable and the government media are just out to support the government without focusing on the right thing to do, which is mobilization, health education, and sensitisation. They concluded that media coverage
has a negative effect on them as they see COVID-19 as just a politically inclined virus. In summary, it could be deduced that ownership and politics has hindered vital opportunities to promote healthy behavior among the Nigerian citizens.

**Discussion of Findings**

In this study, we examined Television coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria. We also interviewed some participants to realize the perceived effect of media coverage of the pandemic. With regard to RQ1 which looked at the frequency of coverage, we found that the TV stations reported the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria frequently. This outcome is in line with a recent study that examined newspaper coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria (Nwakpu et al., 2020). Overall, we realized that the private media had more stories on the pandemic. This echoes H1, which has statistically established that the frequency of news coverage of COVID-19 was greater for AIT than NTA. For the level of prominence given to the coverage of the pandemic (RQ2), we found that the private media had more stories of COVID-19 on its headline and reported more stories as the first headline. This is consistent with H2a which statistically proved a greater number of COVID-19 stories on the headline of AIT than NTA. In terms of the duration of stories, we found that the government media had relatively shorter COVID-19 stories as compared with the private media that allocated more duration (timing) in reporting COVID-19 stories. Accordingly, our findings suggested that the duration of COVID-19 stories was greater for AIT than NTA (H2b). Taken together, we argue that private media apportioned more importance to the issues of COVID-19 in Nigeria. A possible reason for this could be that the government media are skeptical in exposing the weaknesses of the government in handling the problems of COVID-19. Research found that the government-owned mainstream media are mostly skeptical when it comes to criticism of the government in power (Apude, 2017).

One of our goals is to determine the dominant news sources used in the sampled TV stations (RQ3). We found that the government media cited more of government officials, and the private media used more of Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). This outcome resonates with H3 which statistically revealed the usage of government officials as news sources was greater for NTA than AIT. We linked the divergence with media ownership and interest. We also reasoned that politics might have influenced the coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in the government media since many of the stories cited government officials. In addition to the use of news sources, the tones used in the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria (RQ4) was also examined in this study. We found that the private media had
Table 6. Association Between Media Coverage and Politics.

| Chi-square test                  | Value   | df  | Asymptotic significance (two-sided) |
|----------------------------------|---------|-----|------------------------------------|
| Pearson chi-square               | 22.724*| 2   | .000                               |
| Likelihood ratio                 | 21.321  | 2   | .000                               |
| Linear-by-linear association     | 17.548  | 1   | .000                               |
| N of valid cases                 | 30      |     |                                     |

*0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.88.

more negative tone stories, compared with government media that had more positive tone stories. Accordingly, H4 proved that the usage of negative tone in the coverage of COVID-19 was greater for AIT than NTA. We reasoned that the use of more negative tone was to show the severity of the pandemic and as well make people take caution. This is in line with a recent study conducted to realize newspaper coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria (Nwakpu, 2020). Further justification for the usage of negative tone by the private media might be to expose the actual situation of the pandemic in Nigeria. On the other hand, the government media might have used a positive tone to downplay the severity of the pandemic, as well as hinder the people from realizing the incompetence of the government in handling the cases.

Regarding the use of news and visual frames in the coverage of COVID-19 in the two selected TV stations (RQ5), we noticed a divergence in the coverage as well. The private media focused more on fatality/severity, political and awareness/mobilization/containment frames. Meanwhile, government media focused more on government/international body intervention, economical, and political influence frames. Consistent with this outcome, H5a established that the usage of government/international body intervention, economical, and political influence frames was greater for NTA than AIT. One possible reason for the private media focus on its frame could be because of the increasing number of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The implication of severity frame is that it adds to the fear, panic, and tension already created by the virus. However, we feel that the fear created might help in preventing the spread of the pandemic. In addition, private media focused on political inclined stories suggests the influence of politics in the coverage of the pandemic. For the visual frames, a significant difference was found. Most of the stories on private media were supported with visual and motion footages compared with the government-owned media that had more of stock photos and videos. This outcome is in line with the result of H5b which established that the usage of visual/motion footages in reporting the issues of COVID-19 were greater for AIT than NTA. Evidence from prior studies has proven that an actual and realistic visual representation of issues could stir the attention of the audience to understand how adverse a problem is (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). We contend that the government media is downplaying the COVID-19 and most likely keeping the public away from the visual aspect of the pandemic.

Finally, the public’s view on the coverage of the pandemic was also investigated in this study (RQ6). We found that both media stations focused more on economic, political, and the fatality rate of COVID-19, and significant aspect of media performance, which is to educate the public was lacking. Thus, H6 established an association between the media coverage and public attitude/behavior toward COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. And H7 showed an association between the Nigerian political landscape and the coverage of COVID-19. The Nigerian political landscape is dominated by the ruling All Progressives Congress party (APC) and the major opposition party of the People Democratic Party (PDP). These parties continuously struggle for power in Nigeria. Apuke and Tunca (2020) argued that the government media reflect the interest of the ruling party while the private media most probably is used by the opposition party to expose the ills and lapses of the government in power. Intrinsically, we found that due to political interference and ownership, the media missed the opportunity to mobilize, sensitize, and provide adequate health education to the public.

Conclusion

Based on the outcome of this study, we contend that our findings lend support to the agenda setting and framing theory. This is accomplished through frequency of coverage, prominence, and manner of reportage. Furthermore, we conclude that ownership and politics play a large role in the coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria, which supports the propaganda model perspective. It is also our conclusion that there are significant differences in the coverage of the pandemic across private and government TV stations in Nigeria. Although the TV stations had adequate coverage of the pandemic, their manner of framing the issues of the pandemic makes it to be understood from the political and economic perspective, with little attention paid to precautionary measures the public could take. We, therefore, call on the Nigerian media, especially TV, to reinvigorate their role in promoting health education regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than allowing politics and ownership interference to deter their reportage. Our study has some limitations. We focused only on TV stations in Nigeria, and as such, the outcome should be interpreted with caution. Future studies could incorporate other genres to extend our study. Our selection of participants was on purposive sampling which may yield bias. We also focused on only literate, though this was justified. We call on future researchers to use less bias sampling to enable greater generalizability.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
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