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A CONTENT ANALYTICAL STUDY OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF LASSA FEVER IN TWO NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the frequency with which the Punch and Vanguard newspapers reported Lassa fever in the October to December 2018 in Nigeria since it is a serious issue which is easily infectious and claims lives. The study was anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory. It adopted content analysis research design and through the use of purposive sampling technique, the researcher picked 92 editions each of the Punch and Vanguard Newspapers as the sample size of the study. Data revealed that the Punch and Vanguard newspapers Data revealed that The Punch and Vanguard newspapers did not attach enough importance to the coverage of the October to December 2018 Lassa fever issue. Data also showed that Lassa fever was not the major lead story of the newspapers; although the reports had full details on the inside page. In addition, data also showed that The Punch newspapers covered more on the Lassa fever case more than Vanguard newspaper. The study concluded that The Punch and Vanguard newspapers did not do an adequate job in informing the public about what Lassa fever is and the way out by frequently writing on them. The study therefore recommended that the media should enlighten the public about ways to prevent Lassa fever in the country.

Keywords: Lassa fever, Newspapers, Social Responsibility theory, Punch, Vanguard, Media

1.0. Introduction

Lassa fever is an acute viral hemorrhagic fever (VHF) that is caused by the Lassa virus. Worldwide, an estimated 2 million people are infected each year resulting in 5,000 to 10,000 deaths (McCormick,1999). It has been estimated that 300,000 to 500,000 cases and 5000 deaths from Lassa fever occur yearly across West Africa (Ogbu, Ajaluchukwu & Uneke 2007), with an endemic and high seroprevalence rates reported in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia (Kerneis, Koivogui, Magassouba, Koulemou, Lewis, Aplogan, Grais, Guerin &Fichet, 2009). In Nigeria, outbreaks of the infection have been reported in Edo, Ebonyi, Ondo, Taraba, Plateau, Anambra, Nasarawa, Yobe, Ekiti and recently Rivers (Ogbu, et al 2007; Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, NCDC, 2012). Earlier studies have shown that the seroprevalence in Nigeria is about 21% (Tomori, Fabiyi, Soningbe, Smith & McCormick 1988). Thus, the disease is present in virtually all the geographical regions of

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the country. Within the first quarter of 2012, 525 suspected cases of Lassa fever, 96 laboratory-confirmed cases and 54 deaths (CFR 10.3%) were recorded in 16 States as at 9th March, 2012 (NCDC, 2012). A large number of those infected are asymptomatic while a significant proportion of infected individuals only develop mild illness (McCormick, 1987). Recently epidemic instances of the disease have been reported in healthcare workers and within health facilities, often resulting in severe morbidities and mortalities (Institute of Lassa Fever Research and Control, ILFRC, 2011). Some of the causes of Lassa fever according to research done by Ibe (2012) are:

> Use of rat meat as a source of protein by people in some communities; contamination of exposed food by rat feces and urine; Traditional autopsy, where the operator may injure himself with scalpel and contaminate the injury with the blood of the deceased, who may have died of Lassa fever; Forceful ingestion of water used in bathing a dead husband, by a widow suspected to be involved in his death. In many communities, family members may be forced to drink water used in bathing dead relatives in order to prove their innocence, Corrupt practices by staple food producers, which involve drying garri (cassava flour) in the open air in the daytime and sometimes at night. This enables all types of rat including mastomys natalensis to contaminate the flour with their excreta. This constitutes a public health hazard when the infected garri is sold to consumers in the market. The common habit of eating garri soaked in water may favor Lassa fever infection (p.100)

Ibe (2012) is also of the opinion that foods "processed in the open air or sun, which is known as a natural drier which include: rice, plantain chips, yam chips and cassava chips, which are processed into rice flour, plantain flour, yam flour, and raw cassava flour can also cause the lassa virus" (p. 100). Though these are also processed into staple foods such as *tuwo shinkafa*, plantain based *amala*, yam based *amala* and *lafun* respectively, the amount of heat involved in processing them into edible pastes, may be enough to denature Lassa fever virus, which is heat labile. In addition, bush burning of savannahs may be carried out by meat-hungry youths, during the dry season, in order to be able to have access to rodents and other animals. This habit is also known to drive *mastomys natalensis*, the reservoir of Lassa fever virus, into people's homes and may be responsible for outbreaks of Lassa fever in the dry season

Lassa virus has been classified as a 'Category A' pathogen, meaning that, it is considered to be one of the world's most dangerous disease which kills fast if not attended too. In addition, it also causes endemic human disease with public health implications according to Annie (2015) hence, the need for the media to inform and educate the general public on people's lifestyle in order to avoid the disease. This study therefore looked at the newspaper coverage of Lassa fever using the Punch and Vanguard as a case.

2.0. Statement of the Problem

Newspapers are periodical publications which contain editorials and advert materials. (Nwabueze, 2009). It is known to present information in words and this is often supplemented with pictures that provide in-depth explanations but despite all these, can it be said, that there is enough awareness on this issue. In addition, can it be said that there are enough page space in newspapers to create awareness on the issue by giving it prominence. Depth of coverage, forms and frequency. The research looked at newspaper coverage of Lassa fever using Punch and Vanguard newspapers as a case.

3.0. Objectives of the study

1) To find out the frequency of coverage of Lassa fever in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018.
2) To find out the prominence given to Lassa fever in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018.
3) To determine the forms or genre in which Lassa fever stories are presented in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018.
4) To find out major sources from which Lassa fever stories were received by *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018.
5) To find out the depth of coverage of Lassa fever in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018.

4.0. Research Questions

1) What is the frequency of coverage of Lassa fever in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018?
2) What is the prominence given to Lassa fever in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018?
3) What is the form or genre in which Lassa fever stories are presented in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018?
4) What are the major sources from which Lassa fever stories were received by *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018?
5) What is the depth of coverage of Lassa fever in *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers of October to December 2018?

5.0. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the agenda setting theory which states that the facts which people know about are the ones that the mass media presents to them. Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008: 89) opines that the mass media sets the agenda for our general discussion by the number of times an issue is reported by using headlines and picture display strategies to play up a report in the media and by these, the reports give room for points and counter

points. The theory is relevant to the study because Lassa fever is a disease that keeps recurring and claiming lives on a daily basis despite warnings on things to do and things not to do by the media. The media is always coming up on a number of times that it occurs by telling us the details. Thereby we know how serious Lassa fever disease is, in our society and how to find a lasting solution to it.

6.0. Literature Review

6.1. Lassa fever: An Overview

Lassa fever is an acute viral illness that was discovered in 1969 when two missionary nurses died in Borno State Nigeria. The virus was named after the town in Nigeria where the first cases occurred. According to Ute (2012) "Lassa fever is a socially and economically devastating disease that is endemic in West Africa" (p. 109). The Health Initiative for Safety and Stability in Africa Newsletter (2016) says that "Lassa virus is a rodent that is commonly known as the multimammate rat (mastomys natalensis) which gets infected with Lassa virus by shedding the virus in their urine and faeces" (p. 3). When this happens, any human being that eats any of the contaminated food automatically gets infected. Ute further opines that Lassa fever is caused by Lassa fever virus, a member of the family Arenaviridae. It is an enveloped single stranded bi-segmented rna virus Replication for Lassa virus is very rapid, while also demonstrating temporal control in replication.

Lassa fever is common in some parts of West Africa including Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Nigeria; however, other neighboring countries also are at a great risk, as the animal vector for Lassa virus, the "multimammate rat" (Mastomys natalensis) is distributed throughout the region. According to the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Disease Factsheet, in 2009, the first case from Mali was reported in a traveler living in southern Mali; Ghana reported its first cases in late 2011. Meanwhile, isolated cases have also been reported in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso and there is serologic evidence of Lassa virus infection in Togo and Benin. By the 6th of January 2016, the number of deaths had risen to 44 in Nigeria and on the 22nd January the Honourable minister of Health in Nigeria, Professor Isaac Adewole stated that the country currently has 212 cases of Lassa fever which makes it more endemic. The European Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) noted that the disease is endemic in the countries of the Mano river basin which are (Guinea, Sierra Leone & Liberia) and Nigeria. These countries report the majority of Lassa fever cases. In addition, human cases were reported in Ghana (October 2001), Mali (February 2009) and Benin (November 2014). In the past five years, notable outbreaks have been reported in Nigeria in 2012 (1 723 cases, 112 fatalities in 23 states),in 2013 (232 cases, 15 fatalities in nine states) and 2014 (208 cases, 17 fatalities) and in Liberia in 2013 (12 cases, 8 fatalities, Bong county) and (14 cases, 1 fatality, Margibi county). According to the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Disease Factsheet:

> The number of Lassa virus infections per year in West Africa is estimated at 100,000 to 300,000, with approximately 5,000 deaths. Unfortunately, such estimates are crude, because surveillance for cases of the disease is not uniformly performed. In some areas of Sierra Leone and Liberia, it is known that 10%-16% of people admitted to hospitals every year have Lassa fever, which indicates the serious impact of the disease on the population of this region (p. 1)

The number of Lassa virus infections in West Africa per year was roughly estimated at 100,000 to 300,000, with at least 5,000 deaths yearly (Godwin, Jonathan and Shima 2013, p. 43). The disease is common in Nigeria, Guinea, Congo and Liberia. However, according to research, other West Africa countries too may be affected. The overall case-fatality rate is 1%, up to 15% among hospitalized patients (What you need to know accessed on the 31st of December 2016). The incubation period of Lassa fever ranges from 6 to 21 days and death usually occurs within 14days of onset in fatal cases (Health Initiative for Safety & Stability 2016). From studies read, Lassa fever disease is terribly deadly and dangerous. Human beings are usually infected with the virus when they get exposed to urine or faeces of infected mastomys rats and these always occur when there is a direct contact with the blood, urine or other bodily secretions of people infected with the disease.

6.2. Review of Empirical Studies

Smith, Smith and Adedeji (2017) in the study titled the influence of the Nigerian newspaper on Lassa fever reportage investigated the influence of print media in the reportage of Lassa fever in Nigeria. Four Nigerian newspapers which include the Sun, the Guardian, the Nation and the Punch Newspapers were looked into from January to April 2016. The findings showed that January was the most reported month on Lassa fever while April was the least reported. The study concluded that the media played a positive role in bringing to the fore, the awareness of Lassa fever and its attendant dangers. It recommended that newspaper reportage on Lassa fever and other infectious disease in Nigeria should be continuum and not only during outbreaks.

In another study titled, awareness of Lassa fever in a rural community in South-West Nigeria, Ilesanmi, Omotoso, Alele and Adewuyi (2015) notes that Lassa fever is an acute, virulent viral hemorrhagic illness with high morbidity and mortality rates. The study was carried out to assess the awareness of Lassa fever of a rural community in the south western part of Nigeria. The method used wasa descriptive cross sectional study of 122 respondents prior to a sensitization seminar on Lassa fever and it was carried out at Ijebu– Owo, Owo in Ondo State. Descriptive statistics were done and frequencies and proportions were used to summarize variables of interest. Association between socio-demographic characteristics and awareness were explored using chi square. The Level of significance was set at 5%. The result shows that the mean age of the respondents was 54.5±19.2years. Of the 122

respondents, 50.8% were males, three out of four (73.8%) were married, and 87.7% had secondary education and below. Those who had previously heard about Lassa fever were 17.2%. In all 7(46.7%) who had tertiary education experience had previously heard about Lassa fever compared to 14(13.1%) respondents who attended secondary education and below (p=0.001). The study concluded that there was poor awareness of Lassa fever among members of the community. The study recommended that efforts should be made to increase the awareness of the populace through health campaigns, and to reduce the spread of both the vector and the virus.

Tobin, Asogun, Isah and Ebhodaghe (2013) carry out a research on assessment of knowledge and attitude towards Lassa fever among primary care providers in an endemic suburban community of Edo State. The aim of the study was to assess the knowledge and attitude to Lassa fever among primary care providers. Structured questionnaires were administered to consenting primary care workers in Private and Primary health centers in Ekpoma. One hundred and thirty five (135) health workers participated in the study. One hundred and thirty one (97.0%) respondents had previously heard of Lassa fever. Overall knowledge of Lassa fever was poor for 51 (38.9%), and fair for 54 (41.2%) and good for 260 (19.8%). Hand gloves were stated as the most useful personal protective gear when dealing with a patient with Lassa fever. Fifty six (42.7 %) felt their level of knowledge was sufficient for them to safely and effectively handle a patient while 126 (96.4%) expressed their desire to know more about Lassa fever. In conclusion it was discovered that the primary care health worker in a rural area is the one most likely to be the first point of call for persons seeking orthodox medicine. The study therefore, recommended that it is essential that people are adequately informed about the disease, its presentation and prevention.

Using a descriptive cross sectional study among 300 primary health care workers, Adebimpe (2015) investigated knowledge and preventive practices against Lassa fever among primary health care workers in oshogbo. The researchers aim was to find out the level of awareness of Lassa fever by respondents in Oshogbo. The descriptive cross sectional study among 300 primary health care workers were selected using the multistage sampling method. The research instrument was self-administered questionnaire. The results shows that two hundred and thirty eight (79.3%) have heard about Lassa fever while the computed mean knowledge scores showed that 67.7%, 63.0%, 61.2% and 56.0% had good knowledge of occurrences, causes, disease transmission and prevention and control of LF respectively. Only 20(6.7%) of the health care workers had ever reported a suspected case of Lassa fever before, 63 (21.0%) regularly used personal protective devices or equipment (PPE) at work. The Predictors of good knowledge of Lassa fever include being a male, ever reported a case of Lassa fever and regular use of PPE at workplace. The study concluded that the relatively high knowledge of Lassa fever and poor infection control measures that characterized health care workers studied underscore the need for sustained

awareness and improvement in knowledge among PHC workers and therefore recommended that there should be more awareness on the disease so as to save lives.

Again, using a descriptive cross sectional study, Adebimpe (2015) conducts a research on community awareness and perception towards rodent control by looking at the implications for prevention and control of Lassa fever in Urban Slums of South Western Nigeria. The researcher noted that community awareness of vector control could lead to the control of Lassa fever, especially in densely overcrowded and populated slums. The aim of the study was to assess knowledge and attitude towards rodent control in relation to Lassa fever in the Southwest Nigeria. The method used was the descriptive cross-sectional which was used to study Lassa fever and rodent control and it was carried out among 500 community members selected using a multistage sampling method. The research instrument was a self-administered semi-structured pre-tested questionnaire. The results shows that 101 participants (20.2%) had heard about Lassa fever while the mean composite scores showed 19.4%, 14.1%, 17.0% and 13.9% of respondents to have good knowledge of occurrence, causes, disease transmission, as well as prevention and control of Lassa fever respectively. 215 participants (43.0%) lived in overcrowded rooms and only 36 (9.1%) claimed to never have seen a rat in their houses. 206 respondents (41.2%) said they often saw rats crossing between houses. The study concluded that there was poor awareness and knowledge of Lassa fever, together with poor housing facilities and recommended that is a need for relevant stakeholders to ensure better community health education and improved housing conditions in South-Western Nigeria, with an emphasis on slum areas.

Using a content analysis research method, Talabi (2017) examines the coverage of Lassa fever in four Nigerian newspapers where the researcher noted that the media is positioned to be the watchdog of the society. 484 editions of Punch, Tribune, Guardian and the Vanguard of January to April 2016 were selected. The findings from the study shows that 9 stories representing 7.0% of the stories were analyzed positively, 55 stories representing 41.1% was negative while 70 stories representing 52.2% stories was neutral. The result further shows that the four newspapers did not give adequate prominence to the coverage of Lassa fever as the highest reportage of 60.4% which represents 81 stories were placed inside page while 21.6% (29 stories) were at the back page and 17.2% (23 stories) were placed in front page stories. The study concluded that the coverage of Lassa fever by the newspapers was extremely low and was not covered the way it was supposed to and therefore recommended that health information should be given prominence attention by placing health issues on the front page of newspapers.

7.0. Research design

The research design adopted for the study is Content Analysis. Content Analysis according to Baran (2010) is a technique for systematic describing written, spoken or visual communication. The population for the study is October to December 2018 editions of *The*

Punch and *The Vanguard* newspapers that covered cases of Lassa fever. *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers each publish 7 days a week; this makes it a total of 92 days for the October to December, 2018 editions respectively. For the two newspapers used in this study, the total number of editions was 184. 184 editions was analyzed and the unit of analysis were news stories, articles, editorials, cartoons, pictures and letters to the editor while the content categories were Frequency of the report, Prominence and Slant.

8.0. Data Analysis

Out of the 184 editions of both the Punch and Vanguard newspapers that formed the population for this study, the researcher was able to acquire 56 editions for Punch and 30 editions for Vanguard thus, 86 editions were content analyzed.

Table 1: Summary of Types of Reports and their Frequency of occurrence in the selected newspapers

Forms of reports	**Punch Newspaper**	**Percentage %**	**Vanguard Newspaper**	**Percentage %**
News stories	40	71	28	93
Features	2	4	_	_
Editorials	1	2	_	_
Letter to the Editor	5	9	_	_
Pictures	8	14	2	7
Cartoons	_	_	_	_
Total	**56**	**100**	**30**	**100**

The Punch and *Vanguard* newspapers have the same number of editions (92), yet there were more reports in *the Punch* newspaper (56) than there are in *Vanguard* newspaper (30). This shows that the punch newspaper covered it more than vanguard newspaper.

Table 2: Placement of Reports for *The Punch* and *Vanguard*

		Newspaper Sampled			%
2016	**Pages**	***Punch***	***Vanguard***	**Total**	**Percentage**
Months					
July	Front page	5	1	6	7
	Inside page	10	10	20	23
	Back page	5	2	7	8
August	Front page	2	3	5	6
	Inside page	8	14	22	26
	Back page	5	-	5	6
September	Front page	2	-	2	2
	Inside page	16	-	16	19
	Back page	3	-	3	3
TOTAL		**56**	**30**	**86**	**100%**
		0.65%	**0.35%**		

Table 2 reveals that *The Punch* attached adequate importance and attendance to the coverage and reportage of October to December 2018 issues on Lassa fever while *Vanguard* newspaper did not attach adequate importance to the coverage and reportage of the October to December 2018 issues on Lassa fever.

Table 3: The form or genre as presented by *The Punch* and *Vanguard*

Forms of reports	**Punch Newspaper**	**Percentage %**	**Vanguard Newspaper**	**Percentage %**
News stories	40	71	28	93
Features	2	4	_	_
Editorials	1	2	_	_
Letter to the Editor	5	9	_	_
Pictures	8	14	2	7
Cartoons	_	_	_	_
Total	**56**	**100**	**33**	**100**

Table 3 shows that Punch Newspapers covered the issue on Lassa fever more than Vanguard Newspapers by reporting in various ways to make the people understand better.

Table 4: Sources from which the *Punch* and *Vanguard* reported frequency

Source of reports	**Frequency**				**Total**	
	The Punch		**Vanguard**			
	No	**%**	**No**	**%**	**No**	**%**
Coverage/Occurrence	**40**	**71**	**28**	**93**	**68**	**79**
Press release/Statement	-	-	-	-	-	-
Press Conference	-	-	-	-	-	-
Interview	**6**	**11**	**2**	**7**	**8**	**9**
Reporters Analysis	**5**	**9**	-	-	**5**	**6**
Research Findings/ Report	**5**	**9**	-	-	**5**	**6**
Other Media Publication	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	**56**	**100**	**30**	**100**	**86**	**100**

Table 4 shows that that the Punch newspaper covered it more in terms of coverage, reporters analysis and research findings than the Vanguard Newspaper.

Table 5: Depth of Coverage (In terms of Space) for *Punch* and *Vanguard* Newspaper

Depth of Coverage	**Frequency**				**Total**	
	The Punch		**Vanguard**			
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Full page	5	9	1	3.3	6	7
Half page	10	18	4	13.3	14	16
Combined page	-	-	-	-	-	-
More than half	5	9	-	-	5	6
Less than half	36	64	25	83.3	61	71
More than one page	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	56	100	33	100	96	100

Table 5 shows that *The Punch* gave adequate attention to the coverage and reportage of the October to December 2018 Lassa fever issue in terms of pages used in the report analyzed

while Vanguard did not give adequate attention to the coverage and reportage of October to December 2018 Lassa fever issue in terms of pages used in the report analyzed.

9.0. Discussion of Findings

The media is known to play a key role when it comes to giving out information on happenings around us especially when those happenings have to do with lives. The media is known to cover such events from the news aspects, television drama, film and soap operas, thereby reaching a vast audience. *The Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers frequently covered and reported the October to December 2018 cases on Lassa fever. This is so because in an edition in the two newspapers, there was more than one report on Lassa fever. From the findings, it was discovered that The Punch and Vanguard newspapers did not attach enough importance to the coverage of the October to December 2018 issues on Lassa fever which was also collaborated by Talabi (2017) who noted that newspapers did not give prominence to Lassa fever coverage since the stories were majorly inside the page. This was also collaborated by Uwom and Oloyede (2014) who noted that newspapers did not give prominence to health issues by way of placement and giving it enough space. Smith, Smith and Adedeji (2017) noted that the media played a positive role in bringing to the fore, the awareness of Lassa fever and its attendant dangers, stating that newspaper reportage on Lassa fever and other infectious disease in Nigeria should be continuum and not only during outbreaks.

From the data collected, it was also discovered that the punch newspaper covered the issue on Lassa fever more than vanguard newspaper by reporting in various ways to make the people understand better. This was also collaborated by Tobin, Asogun, Isah and Ebhodaghe (2013) who assessed the knowledge and attitude to Lassa fever among primary care providers. Expressing that there is a desire to know more about Lassa fever especially in areas where it is very rampant. So it is essential that people are adequately informed about the disease, its presentation and prevention. Based on the findings gathered in this research work, the researcher discovered that there was only one editorial and no cartoon on Lassa fever in the punch and vanguard newspapers. The data collected by the researcher also revealed that punch newspaper covered more issues on Lassa fever than Vanguard newspaper in the area of new stories, features, editorials, letters to the editors and pictures. The reason why this is so is not known to the researcher at all.

10.0. Conclusion

The mass media are crucial in nation building because they disseminate information on things happening around to the general public and also ways in which diseases can be prevented or curtailed. Lassa fever is a deadly disease that kills fast if not attended to immediately as it sometimes gives the symptoms of malaria, thereby making people not to know that they had been infected. From the findings and data gathered in this study, the researcher concluded that the punch and vanguard newspaper have not done adequate job of creating awareness on Lassa fever by writing on it on a daily basis because if they had, there won't be any more Lassa fever outbreak.

It was also discovered that the punch newspaper gave more importance to the coverage and reportage of Lassa fever by having 40 new stories as against 28 reports from vanguard, 2 feature as against none from the vanguard, 1 editorial as against none from vanguard, 5 letters to the editor as against none from the vanguard and 8 pictures as against 2 from vanguard. This shows that the punch newspaper gave more adequate importance to the coverage of the October to December 2018 issues on Lassa fever.

Based on the following findings gathered in the course of this research, the researcher therefore made the following recommendations:

1) The mass media should be balanced in their reportage of sensitive issues like Lassa fever disease since it is known to kill fast.
2) Journalist should give more importance to the coverage and reportage of Lassa fever disease in other to create awareness since most people still do not understand the causes, symptoms and how to prevent it in other to save lives.

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