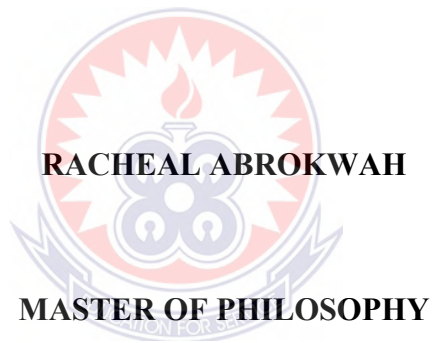


UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA

**COVERAGE OF COVID-19 ON SELECTED GHANAIAN ONLINE
NEWS PORTALS**



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**COVERAGE OF COVID-19 ON SELECTED GHANAIAN ONLINE
NEWS PORTALS**

RACHEAL ABROKWAH



**A dissertation in the Department of Strategic Communication, School of
Communication and Media Studies, submitted to the School of
Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Philosophy
(Business Communication)
in the University of Education, Winneba.**

November, 2021

DECLARATION

I, Racheal Abrokwah declare that this dissertation, with the exception of quotations and references contained in published works which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my own original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION



I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this work was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for supervision of dissertation as laid down by the University of Education, Winneba.

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: GIFTY APPIAH-ADJEI (PhD)

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

DEDICATION

Special Dedication to Mr Opong Gyamfi and my family.



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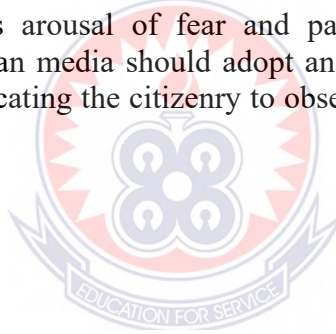
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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic was spreading at an alarming rate and caused a lot of fear in people. This stimulated a certain curiosity in me to find out more about the deadly virus and how the media reported it. Therefore, this study explores how selected Ghanaian online news portals gave coverage to the COVID-19 disease. Employing a qualitative content analysis, the study purposively selected two leading media houses with digital presence. The study explores the salience given to the COVID-19 pandemic by the selected media houses and investigates the frames used by the news portals in reporting on the pandemic. With the aid of the agenda setting and framing theories, the findings revealed that 66% of the news stories concentrated on COVID-19. In addition, the selected news portals framed COVID-19 around disease control, bare statistics, consequence and research and development. The study found that the Ghanaian media gave salience to the issue of COVID-19 in the course of news reportage. Also, frames used in the coverage of COVID-19 stories were in synchrony with the norms and values of the Ghanaian society bringing to bear how media houses re-mould news stories before their final reportage. The study concludes that the Ghanaian media executed its role as an educator through a consistent awareness creation of the pandemic without causing any alarm in the course of executing its educative role. The study will aid journalists to liaise with medical professionals during any disease outbreak. This will ensure accuracy in the reportage of health issues with little to less arousal of fear and panic among audience. The study recommends that Ghanaian media should adopt an early pattern of reportage during health crisis to aid in educating the citizenry to observe all protocols instigated by the government.



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background

The outbreak of coronavirus was first reported as a mystery pneumonia disease by the World Health Organisation. The virus was however named as SARS-Cov-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) by the International Taxonomy of Virus. Coronavirus represents pathogens that have emerged multiple times from zoonotic reservoirs over the past centuries (Furuse et al., 2015; Perlman & Butler, 2008; Menachery et al., 2014). The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic after it crossed the borders of China to over one hundred and forty-four (144) countries (WHO 2020). Due to the impact of the virus on humanity, quite a number of studies have been conducted in the sciences and its origin- Wuhan, Huanan seafood market with the exact host unidentified (Lin, 2020; Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020; Shereen, *et al.*, 2020).

As at 24th June, 2020, there had been 9,129,146 confirmed cases globally of COVID-19, including 473,797 deaths (WHO 2020). Ghana recorded its first case on the 11th of March, 2020 and as witnessed in many countries, the number of cases kept rising exponentially. According to the Ministry of Health, Ghana had confirmed 15,013 cases as at 25th June, 2020. This number consists of 11,078 recoveries and discharges, 95 deaths; 3840 active cases and 445 new cases. However, as at 23rd of January, 2021, the world had recorded 99,771,343 cases with 71,745,121 recoveries, 25,886,051 active and 2,138,965 fatalities. Statistics from Ghana indicated a total of 60,794 confirmed cases with 57,141 persons discharged, 3,286 active cases and 367 deaths. Though vaccines for the treatment of COVID-19 have not been found yet (WHO 2020) , therapeutic strategies as well as the use of hydroxychloroquine,

azithromycin, tocilizumab and others have been used in the management of patients with virus (Shereen *et al.*, 2020; Gautret *et al.*, 2020; Xu *et al.*, 2020). As means of control, countries have issued laws on the observation of sanitary and precautionary measures like the observance of social distancing, wearing of nose masks, face shields and washing of hands with soap under running water among others.

It is important to note that the media has given coverage to the pandemic at global and local levels so as to disseminate information and educate publics on the transmission, severity, recoveries and deaths. At the onset of the outbreak, only mainstream media across the globe like BBC, Aljazeera, CNN, DW TV and People's Daily (China) provided coverage to the virus and created awareness of the new SARS-CoV-2 through their online news portals, social media handles and live broadcast. However, as the disease spread to other countries, the local media in such countries also joined in the awareness creation new SARS-CoV-2 (Tih, 2020). The Ghanaian media have played their educative and informative roles so far as coverage of the pandemic is concerned. News about the pandemic from different sources, such as, medical practitioners, politicians, government officials, COVID-19 patients and their families, journalists, individuals, as well as, organisations have been captured by these media houses. Issuances of Press releases, publication of newspaper articles, television and radio broadcast and public education in advertisements have conveyed messages about the pandemic to publics. This supports evidence from Davis (2014) that pandemics mediated by the media provides contents for knowledge and understanding to audiences and updates them on public health issues.

Besides, the new media have not been left out in the coverage of the pandemic in Ghana. They have played essential roles in communications by various public health authorities charged with educating and advising publics on ways to conduct

themselves during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the presidential update on the disease. Messages on precautionary and sanitary measures, updates on the modes of transmission or infection, severity of the disease, prevention, control and possible treatment have been posted on the personal social media accounts of the authorities and prominent personalities. Moreover, the social media handles and online news portals of the media outlets in Ghana have been used to do same. Also, the COVID-19 Tracker App has been launched to aid the country in the tracking of all infected persons and to facilitate treatment.

1.1 Coronavirus Pandemic

The first emergence of coronavirus (CoV HKU15) dates back to 1570-1698 even though it was not readily recognised as such (Woo et al., 2017). Since its emergence, the world has been smashed by several variants of coronavirus related diseases including the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2002-2003 (SARS-CoV), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome 2012 (MERs), Swine Flu 2009 (H1N1) (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014), HKU15 (Menachery et al., 2014) and currently COVID-19, also known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first coronavirus case was reported in the 1930's as avian bronchitis virus (IBV). After this report, many coronavirus infections have been recorded among mammals (cattle, bats, pigs) (Woo et al., 2017) and birds (Wevers & van der Hoek, 2009) therefore rendering it zoonotic. Woo *et al.* (2017) further indicate that, coronavirus (HKU15), was identified in the faeces and intestines of pigs in many regions across the globe. However, their study showed that there were exceptional cases where coronavirus was identified in the liver, lungs, kidney, saliva or oral fluid of pigs with rate of infection varying in seasons. That is, winter possesses higher chances of infection than in

autumn, spring and summer. Conclusion made by Wevers & van der Hoek (2009) revealed that although coronaviruses are associated with animals, the viruses have also been identified as human pathogens. Talking about some types of coronavirus, their study highlighted the range of severity of coronavirus infections from mild to morbidity and mortality.

Furthermore, Furuse et al. (2015) assert that coronavirus, which was identified in camels in the Middle East, contributed to the 2012 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus which evolved or mutated over time was established to pose great threat to mankind. Drosten et al. (2015) and Memish et al. (2015) concluded that the symptoms of the disease were relative. However, out of 14 patients studied, 100% of them experienced fever, 64% suffered shortness of breath, 50% coughed, and 35% were nauseous with headaches whereas 21% had sore throat. The disease was high among those suffering from chronic diseases (heart attack, diabetes, sickle cell, obesity).

Many studies conducted on the variants of coronavirus concluded on a similar mode of transmission, incubation, infection, immunity, possible control and treatment (Drosten et al., 2015; Furuse et al., 2015; Memish et al., 2015; Menachery et al., 2014; Woo et al., 2017). The studies above revealed that coronavirus is a respiratory disease transmitted from being in contact with the oral fluid or respiratory route of an infected person. The virus has capping mechanisms that mimics the host's immune system and later fights against the immune system. However, the ability of the immune system to overcome these sequence capping mechanisms helps the body to successfully overcome the virus. Also, findings of these studies revealed that the best control mechanism to prevent its spread is only through isolation of infected persons

and host-directed therapies (HDT's) along with treatments that target the activity and function of the non-structural proteins (NSP16/NSP10).

COVID-19 is the third coronavirus outbreak in the 21st century with an unknown host of the virus and a devastating rate of infection which has a higher risk of contraction among people with weak immune systems (Sahu et al., 2020). However, Fisher and Heymann (2020) posit that analysis of the virus' host matched with a bat and bore resemblance to SARS like bat coronavirus. Kim et al (2017) conducted a study to identify deviations in MERS patients. The study revealed that it took 14 days for incubation of the virus, and patients suffered from respiratory related complications with severe cases of pneumonia. This finding falls in line with the World Health Organisation's description of COVID-19. Most common symptoms are fever, dry cough and tiredness: whereas less common symptoms are aches and pains, sore throat, diarrhoea, conjunctivitis, headaches, loss of taste or smell, skin rashes, or discolouration of fingers or toes. Serious symptoms are difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath, chest pain or pressure, loss of speech or movement (WHO 2020). Shereen et al. (2020) suggested in their work that the decision of returning all expatriates to their home countries and the poor precautionary and sanitary measures have become the leading cause of the spread of the virus globally. Despite these assertions, most Africans claimed Africans immunity due to the melanin in their skin along with other myths (Serwonoo & Abrokwah 2020). However, this was debunked as some Africans in diaspora were confirmed positive with the human coronavirus (Kendi, 2020).

In Ghana, Veronica buckets, soaps and hand sanitizers are positioned at various vantage points across the country. Most countries across the globe went on a lockdown to restrict movement and minimise spread of which Ghana was no

exception. However, the country together with the world has been hit by the second wave and this has been attributed to negligence or disregard for restrictive and precautionary measures instituted. This has led to a massive spike in COVID-19 cases in the world of which Ghana is no exception as at 8th of November, 2020 (Tih, 2020). Unlike the strain identified in the virus during the early outbreak, Ghana has identified a variant or mutation in the second wave which is assumed to have been imported and the country's average increase rate is 200 cases daily (Naadi, 2020).

1.2 Media and Health Issues

Information dissemination to publics is enhanced through mass media. Health information is relayed by journalists through the traditional and digital media to numerous audiences' on the awareness of a disease, preventive and precautionary measures with the purpose of enlightening the general public as well as seeking their general wellbeing. Health reports through the mass media stimulate attitudinal change in audiences (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014; Yusha'u, 2011). Almost all broadcast and print media have online sites which serves as archives of news shared on the traditional platforms and a reference for news to be shared to listeners. Despite the level of illiteracy and the less usage of smart phones in Ghana, the targeted audience for online news still patronise the online broadcast or coverage of news items (Smith & Tietaah, 2017). Health practitioners, the government and the World Health Organisation utilise the mass media to relay vital information on health, and in this case the COVID-19 pandemic to Ghanaians as the citizenry rely solely on mass media for information. In line with assertions by Smith and Tietaah (2017) and Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013), the attention people give to pandemics and epidemics are as a result of the media's coverage. The more the coverage on pandemics and epidemics

with facts from experts like scientists and health practitioners, the greater the citizenry thread cautiously to avoid being infected. This is attributed highly to the tones, prominence and alarming messages conveyed by these experts or credible sources through the media (Villena-alarcón & Caballero-galeote, 2020). Smith and Tietz, (2017) and Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013) further assert that the lesser the media coverage of an epidemic, the lesser the citizenry associates some level of importance on its fatalities.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Over the years, the world has been struck by numerous pandemics. They differ from severity, modes of spread, treatments either by vaccination or a life dependency on a type of medication as a way of managing it or allowing the global populace to become self-immune. Pandemics have led to a significant number of deaths globally irrespective of the time and season they erupt (Roos, 2020). HIV/AIDS, Cholera, Flu, Black Death (Byrne, 2008) have been recorded as the deadliest pandemics ever faced by the world including COVID-19 also known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2 (SARS CoV-2).

Information on the presence and spread of pandemics are enhanced through the media. The media plays a vital role in disseminating information to publics or audiences and therefore has the power to coin such information for the public to view it in their perspective (Davis, 2014). Media houses are the ears, eyes and mouthpiece of a nation as well as a channel through which information reaches the public. Information from the media to publics is often selected and projected, geared towards shaping attitudes of the citizenry (Yusha'u, 2011; Krishnatray & Gaddekar, 2014; McCombs, *et al.*, 2014). Public opinions of and attitudes towards pandemics are

shaped by news coverage and storylines. These opinions are as results of the content of news coverage on health issues. This determines the level of seriousness attached to safety and projections on the outbreak of future pandemics.

COVID-19 is a respiratory viral infection initially transferred from animal to human and later within humans through contact with an infected host's respiratory dropping (WHO 2020). Pandemics in general have been widely studied notwithstanding coronavirus related epidemics with regards to their discovery, diagnosis, severity as well as fatalities, recoveries, mode transmissions and treatments given to patients (Woo et al 2017; Furuse et al 2015; Menachery et al 2014; Drosten et al 2014). As coverage of these pandemics is equally important as a way of informing and educating the public, media effect researches have carried out studies in this regard. Mention can be made of studies on the media coverage of H1N1 (Oh et al 2012; Rossman et al 2018), MERS (Lee & Paik, 2017), SARS CoV (Tai & Sun, 2007). Also in Ghana, Iddrisu (2018) explored the content of coverage in the Ghanaian newspaper on the 2014 Ebola outbreak. The study revealed little to no coverage of Ebola in the news media. However, there was a sudden increase in media reportage as a result of suspected cases in the country. This assertion was refuted as suspected cases turned out negative. Although Ghana recorded zero case, news of Ebola impacted the society both negatively and positively. The study also brought to bare the weak nature of Ghana's preparedness and how it would have been hit in the case of recording Ebola cases. Furthermore, Appawu et al. (2006) investigated the surveillance of dangers in the spread of viral haemorrhagic fevers in Ghana (Yellow Fever). The study showed that dry seasons record higher cases across towns understudy as compared to wet or rainy seasons. Concentration of the study was in the northern part of Ghana. Mosquitoes identified were *Aedes aegypti* (96%) and *Aedes africanus* (4%). They

also found that towns with pipe-borne water recorded lesser larvae indices paralleled to towns with less or no pipe-borne water that had to store water which resulted in larvae breeding. The study concluded by providing some measures to control the outbreak of Yellow Fever and Dengue haemorrhagic fever and Dengue. Again, Smith & Tietaah (2017) looked at the attention the media gave in the reportage of meningitis in Ghana. The study concluded that little media attention was geared towards the coverage of the epidemic.

Though a new phenomenon, a lot of studies have been conducted on the origin, mode of transmission, possible ways of treatment, and preventive techniques for COVID-19 (Fisher & Heymann, 2020; Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020; Shereen et al., 2020) . Limited studies have however been carried out globally on COVID-19 and media coverage. Media related studies on the pandemic concentrated on COVID-19 and social media (Dong & Zheng, 2020; Gao et al., 2020; Lin, 2020; Serwaa et al., 2020). In particular, Dong & Zheng, (2020) focused on the outcome of online news coverage on various social media handles has on audiences. Their study revealed that these platforms carry exaggerated news which affected audiences negatively after they had consumed the news. Findings showed that most audiences as a result of the portrayal of COVID-19 on social media had developed anxiety syndrome, depression and stress due to the panic and fear caused by these social handles. They concluded their study by advocating for the presence of public health institutions and experts to be the only source of information on health for various media houses and the regulation of health news coverage by the government to prevent and/ or minimise public fear and stress disorder. In similar vein, Gao et al. (2020) focused on establishing a correlation between mental health problems experiences of citizens as a result of their exposure to social media news on COVID-19. Outcome from their study revealed a positive

correlation between the mental health problems of Chinese citizens and the news from various social media handles. The more exposure the citizenry had with social media news on COVID-19, the higher the rate of anxiety and vice versa. They concluded their study by seeking the government's concern and attention to the information published on various social media handles as they posed greater threats to the mental health of the Chinese citizenry. Also, Lin (2020) iterated on the development of empathy with China as the epicentre of COVID-19. The study focused on empathy because persons with Asian descent, especially Chinese were cyber bullied along with conspiracy theories and the encouragement of racism among some political leaders and media houses.

Serwaa et al. (2020) studied the awareness, danger, understanding and readiness in responding to COVID-19 during its premature stage in Ghana. Revelation from their study showed that Ghanaians had knowledge of the pandemic due to their social media exposure. This attributed to some Ghanaians living in fear due to the conspiracy theories and misleading information concerning the disease. They added that the level of preparedness among Ghanaians was low and suggested that the media should disseminate timely information to enhance adequate preparedness and cooperation among the Ghanaian citizenry not forgetting the need for public education. They concluded by identifying that higher inequality record attributed to the level of preparedness risk perception. Thus, the educated populace had an advanced risk discernment and moderate readiness towards COVID-19 as against the uneducated populace. Little exploration on the coverage of COVID-19 on online news portals have been carried out globally. For instance, Arafat et al., (2020) concentrated on the media's presentation of panic buying (PB) in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that news on panic buying differed from high income countries

(HIC) to low and middle income countries (LMIC). This led to paucity of items. Thus, the impact of PB as a result of the pandemic was due to associated uncertainties and the fact that some countries were already under lockdown. Mutua (2020) focused on how some global media organisations (BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera and People's Daily) reported COVID-19 at its initial phase. They discovered that the closer the pandemic got to these media houses domestically, the wider coverage was given to it. Also, the framing of the disease affected both public and political arguments. Again, Ogbodo et al. (2020) explored the dominant frames used by global media in their COVID-19 news reportage as well as the languages adopted. They identified that the media employed both gloomy and soft words in their reportage which highly influenced how the pandemic was framed. They noted that the framing and delivery of reportage on COVID-19 affected how people perceived the pandemic and its influence on their attitude.

In Ghana, studies on COVID-19 have focused on its impact on education, limitation of spread in the transportation sector, the Ghanaian economy among others. Studies by Bonful et al. (2020) investigated the environmental readiness and compliance with instigated sanitary measures in selected public transport stations in the Greater Accra Region. Their study revealed that facilities like soap, paper napkin and veronica buckets were positioned at vantage points. However, passengers were not using them. It was also identified that the practicability of social distancing in the vehicles were rarely observed. Less usage of protective gears like nose mask and face shields were also identified. They concluded that these acts were as a result of less public education on the virus hence, attached no level of seriousness to it by the populace. Also, Henaku (2020) focused on investigating how university students felt and viewed the implementation of online learning in Ghana. The study revealed the various

challenges students faced in the adoption of e-learning. The study concluded that students preferred a call off from the online learning due to the difficulties they faced. Study conducted by Yeboah and Gyamea (2020) aimed at the government of Ghana's expenditure in combating the COVID-19 virus. Employing a quantitative content analysis, the study discovered the government's cushioning of the health sector, banking sector, manufacturing sector, introduction of tax reliefs and support for the vulnerable. It was summed that the government of Ghana's effort in curbing the virus led to a greater slash in its economy. These supported the populace greatly and relieved them of their struggles. The COVID-19 pandemic was spreading at an alarming rate and caused a lot of fear in people. This stimulated a certain curiosity in me to find out more about the deadly virus and how the media reported it. Hence, the study aimed to investigate how the Ghanaian media framed the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a gap in literature because studies are scant on the coverage of COVID-19 on Ghanaian online news portals. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how selected Ghanaian online news portals covered COVID-19 employing a qualitative approach and content analysis design.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To explore the nature of coverage of COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*.
2. To identify the frames used in covering news on COVID-19 *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*

1.5 Research Questions

1. What is the nature of coverage given to the issue of COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?
2. What are the frames used in covering news on COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?

1.6 Significance of the Study

By investigating how selected online media portals covered stories on COVID-19 in Ghana, this study will add greatly to the meagre literature in the Ghanaian context on news coverage of other malignant diseases in the country and the world at large. Also, the study will fill the gap in academia essential in the larger global dialogue.

Furthermore, findings arising from this study will charge media houses to give high importance to any future outbreak of disease, epidemic or pandemic without relying on the proximity value or the nearness of the pandemic before sounding an alarm to audiences. This will aid early commencement of public education on possible causes of diseases, mode of spread and preventive measures with the aim of minimising possible rate of infection. Also, the study charges health practitioners and scientists in the country to collaborate with media houses by providing them with information on possible disease outbreak as health practitioners are mostly deemed credible sources whose messages carry weights and will ignite the need for concern among audiences.

The study will aid the Ghanaian media to instigate fact-checkers and establish codes and policies to regulate health messages before they are relayed to audiences to prevent the spread of inaccurate news by media houses in the reportage of news on pandemics, epidemics and diseases as well as other related health issues.

Also, the study aims to direct the Ghanaian media on the need to train journalists in public health or science journalism to be able to decipher between which news on health should be relayed to the audiences as this will enhance the media's educative role.

1.7 Scope of Study

This study focused on examining how selected online news portals in Ghana covered news on COVID-19. Nonetheless, the research was restricted to the Ghanaian location with a focus on two Accra based radio stations' online news portals. The focus of this study was on the issues that emerged from the news coverage of the selected online news portals. For the purposes of this study, the researcher examined the online news portals of two radio stations in Accra – Citi FM and Peace FM centred on their strong audience based (Geopoll Media Measurement 2019). That is, the top two most listened to radio stations in Ghana out of the lots. As this study is qualitative in nature, it cannot be generalized to other context. It is limited to the Ghanaian context and may not apply in other geographical locations. Also, findings cannot be extended for other online news portals in the country. The study is also limited to a time frame thus, 12th March, 2020 to 30th April, 2020.

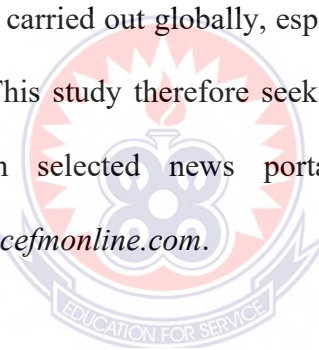
1.8 Organisation of Study

The study is structured into five chapters. Chapter one encompasses the background of the study, the objectives of the study, research questions, significance of the study, delimitations, and the organisation of the study. Chapter two reviews related literature and deliberates on the theories in whose context the research is situate. The third chapter discusses the methods and procedure for data collection and analysis. Here,

the research approach, research design, population, sample and sampling technique, data collection instruments, data collection procedure and method of data analysis are discussed. Chapter four elaborates the findings and discussions of the study while chapter five summarises the findings arising out of the study, draws conclusions and makes recommendations for further studies.

1.9 Summary

This chapter gave the overview of pandemics narrowing it down to COVID-19 and the media's part in reporting news stories in this regard on news portals. While it is evident that the news media plays a vital role in news reportage of health issues, minimal studies have been carried out globally, especially in the Ghanaian context on coverage of COVID-19. This study therefore seeks to add to the scant literature on COVID-19 reportage on selected news portals in Ghana with focus on *citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com*.



CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.0 Introduction

This study seeks to explore how selected Ghanaian online news portals covered news of COVID-19. The chapter reviews various works related to media coverage of pandemics, epidemics and diseases. It also discusses the Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory with the aim of helping situate the research within context.

2.1 Media and Health Communication

The media continue to play a significant role in the dissemination of information, especially pandemics to audiences by revealing its severity whether individuals are directly present at the epicentre or farther from the epicentre (Davis, 2014). The media's role is to attract attention, educate as well as cause a change in behaviour. During health crisis communication, the media educates the public on the possible cause or origin of the issue threatening the lives of mankind. This is done by giving prominence to health issues and their possible preventive measures (Natércia et al., 2010; Smith & Tietah, 2017). Unlike most social topics, events and occasions whose media coverage is irregular, public health crises seem to be an exception in media coverage. Their coverage takes a longer duration with the aim of attracting attention, giving salience and causing attitudinal change of populace. Salience is given to pandemics based on the relevance of events; domestic and/or international outbreak (Oh et al., 2012).

A study by Coleman et al. (2011) focused on exploring how behavioural intentions are affected by episodic and thematic framing of health messages as well as sourcing. They argue in their study that, reporters who have an in-depth understanding of public

health framing and its application are more likely to affect audiences' conception. The study focused on how news sourcing and thematic framing move audiences' opinions with regards to their health issues just the way that public health experts intend to. The study brings to bare the environment's attribution to health problems from the public health officers' views which is not always seen by the audiences as so rather, audiences attribute health problems to other individuals. Thus, instead of viewing how the environment contributes to the constant increase in health problems, audiences will rather blame other individuals in the society for their health issues. For instance, poor environmental hygiene is likely to result in cholera outbreak. Whereas individuals can cater for the sanitation issues in their locality, they will rather blame the government or assembly for the outbreak with little or no regards to the underlying cause of the health problem. The study revealed that in cases where public health stories are framed as being preventable with outlined precautionary measures, a corresponding attitudinal change is seen in audiences. Specifically, publics will support positive environmental change and this is likely to completely transform their health as well as their support for change in societal policies. To the researchers, sources of information are deemed major influencers on audiences' perception. Journalists rely on the expert sources (doctors, public health officials, scientists, etc.) in the coverage of health issues as they are deemed more credible compared to other sources. Individuals suffering from health issues can be deemed as credible sources for news reportage as these persons have first-hand experience with the particular health issue. This claim has challenged others that attribute credibility of health issues to health practitioners only. Coleman et al. (2011) assertion on the differing views of public health professionals and audiences in relation to the environment validates the empirical evidence that peoples cultural values or ways of doing things are affected

by the norms of society (Littlejohn et al., 2012). Findings which concentrated on framing news stories in smoking as deadly and detrimental to health with scientific backings still has a greater portion of unconcerned people. This implies that news sourcing has differing effects in news stories and with it level of influence dependent on the story topic. The study was concluded by pointing out clearly the positive effect news stories will have on audiences if reporters understand public health and frame these stories in like manner than adopting the traditional framing of news stories.

It has been opined by Smith and Tietaah (2017) that little attention has been devoted to meningitis outbreak reportage despite its level of fatality in the northern part of Ghana. The study notes that prominence was not given to this health issue, especially the inclusion of multimedia (videos, images and audios). They iterated that health issues regarding meningitis reportage concentrated on fatality projection with neutral tones. Also, media coverage was low but gradually increased as mortality rate increased. Hence, the media did not execute its duties on public education. Accordingly, the media's role on information dissemination with the purpose of educating and causing behavioural change in audiences was not achieved.

The first school of thought posit that, the media educates and draws audience attention to health as well as help curb, control or prevent outbreak (Rossmann et al., 2018). The second school of thought says otherwise. So, the media exaggerates and attaches some level of emotions to what they say and often mislead audience or creates unnecessary fear and panic (Rossmann et al., 2018). This affirms one out of the two schools of thought. Smith and Tietaah (2017) therefore, concluded that the media's purpose was not achieved in its reportage on meningitis. However, the concentration of reportage on the mortality rate caused fear among audiences. The study revealed that media houses in Ghana project fatalities and deaths against preventive measures

and mode of transmission. Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013) orates that the media hypes health related issues. Evidently, the media either educates the publics on health related issues or amplifies unnecessary fear and panic (Smith & Tietaaah, 2017). Smith and Tietaaah (2017) identified that the media, especially journalists in Ghana, take the easy way out in news reportage. In relation to serious health issues, they recommended journalists presence on site and have a first-hand confrontation with the issue as well as the persons living with these experiences.

Also, Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013) claim that news coverage of pandemics have high alarming messages at the onset of the pandemic even before it becomes an epidemic. That is, coverage is higher in unaffected countries compared to countries with recorded cases. For example, in the coverage of the 2009 influenza A in the Dutch media, the first two weeks recorded the most intensive coverage. The study revealed that the surges in media attention were not linked to the progression of the pandemic in their home country - Netherlands. Findings from the study pointed out that news on the influenza was framed as catastrophic; the pandemic was mild in actuality. The media's attention given to the pandemic domestically was but hype. Furthermore, Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013) highlighted that news coverage was highly driven by regulatory agencies - government officials, expert sources and public health authorities. They iterated that, media hype was as a result of journalistic frames employed due to the preconceived notions journalists have on pandemics. Due to its fatality, the term pandemic has been viewed as a mysterious and dreadful disease outbreak which is seen as a threat to the existence of mankind. They also identified that even death records from infection cases were mostly patients with underlying health conditions with 5% exceptional cases. Expert sources and public health authorities later minimised the hype.

In the same vein, Natércia et al. (2010) assert that journalistic frames on health issue coverage tends to be overhyped as against actual issues due to less research conducted on the issue. News stories on health issues influences audiences irrespective of the nature of information relayed – whether the information is misleading or accurate. The study focused on the analysis of influenza pandemic coverage on the main Brazilian TV news. They identified that news coverage of diseases changes over time. Thus, the initial phase is marked with high alarming message, the preparatory phase with mixed messages and the containment stage with the actual pandemic message. This falls in line with Vasterman and Ruigork's (2013) assertion that, news coverage of pandemics has phases.

In addition, Natércia et al. (2010) avows that as a way of giving salience to news reportage on influenza virus A(A H1N1), the sources of news worked as a trustworthy sign by buttressing and making the news licit. This aided in the placement of the pandemic on top of other issues, hence, attracting public attention. Government sources were more visible implying that the government is directly responsible in the management of the crisis. According to the study, media coverage or reportage of the influenza virus could have commenced earlier without waiting for their country (Brazil) to record cases before giving the disease some media attention. Rather, media coverage of the influenza virus infection commenced only after the WHO raised an alarm. This goes a long way to inform media houses that the rise of a disease within a country or outside the borders of a country, calls for immediate coverage to pre-inform the public as well as prepare them well before they are caught up with uncertainty.

A study by Davis (2014) stated that when pandemics or health are mediated by the media, there is the endowment of content for knowledge availability on the pandemic

to audiences and through public discourse, policy makes adopt new ways of dealing with those health issues. The study adds that the media exaggerate and attach some level of emotions to their coverage and mislead audience or create unnecessary fear and panic. The realisation that the media go astray in the execution of their duties calls for an action from check institutions to monitor what goes out to audiences, especially on public health issues.

A study by Kilgo et al (2018), aimed at examining newspaper coverage of the 2014 Ebola crisis as well as its presentation on social media platform. The study focused on the differences in media presentation for Ebola between newspapers and a social media platform. The study revealed that the newspaper coverage provided more solutions to minimising the spread of Ebola, possible vaccines, medical intervention, humanitarian assistance and possible preventive measures. However, unlike the newspapers, the social media platform preached more of the dangers of Ebola with a little focus on the solutions to the disease. Also, the study exposed the panic inducing elements that were adopted by the social media platform in covering Ebola. Thus, the social media platform focused on publishing articles that highlighted America's infection rate. In contrast, the newspaper's reportage induced less panic on Ebola news coverage. According to Kilgo et al. (2018), newspaper no longer report speculations compared to the broadcast media. Print media journalists undertake thorough checks of news stories with the aim of confirming and refuting rumours before presenting for public consumption. Unlike broadcast whose news is constant and focuses on releasing immediate breaking news which may or may not be confirmed before coverage, print reports episodic breaking news. This gives newspapers the upper hand in validating accuracy and highlights one core element of the profession, verification before publication. In contrast, Oh et al. (2012) argue that

media coverage of pandemics are not over hyped. In identifying the cross cultural variations in the coverage of H1N1 pandemic, they found out that stories covered by journalists are selected carefully and highly dependent on the source of the information. This is done by cross-checking reliability due to the health risk and threats media hype poses to the public. To the researchers, the media framed H1N1 as a deadly disease among all age groups taking into consideration the nearness of the disease or pandemic.

It has been established in literature that the nearness of the pandemic to the place of reportage affects the level of attention given to the pandemic. For instance, the discovery of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome in Saudi Arabia in 2012 had the media houses at the epicentre and media houses in neighbouring countries giving much attention to the disease. This can be attributed to the direct effect of the disease on the country. Oh et al. (2012) also realised that both countries where the study was conducted had experts, government and international sources as the most cited sources of reportage. This explains that in times of disease outbreaks, experts have the technical knowhow of the disease and can advise on ways to provide solutions to the disease outbreak, international sources like the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) generates health standards or directives to minimize disease spread and vaccines to boost immunity whereas the government seeks the welfare of the people in their countries and possible ways to overcome the outcome of the disease.

Similarly, Shih et al. (2008) support Oh et al.'s (2012) assertion that, media coverage of issues, for that matter epidemics and pandemics, are mostly centred on the issue of proximity value. Prominence of a pandemic is given coverage based on how near the issue is domestically. They postulated that the coverage of epidemics in relation to

media agenda is event-based. Thus, reportage is given to the disease as and when it happens and in accordance with the changing nature over time. For instance, in exploring how print media framed public health pandemics (Avian Flu, West Nile virus and Mad Cow disease) in the US, new evidence of the pandemics suddenly became salient against other frames. It, however, subsided with salience given to uncertainty frame. To them, the consistency in framing diseases suggests that journalists give attention to issues of substance in relation to epidemic, pandemic or disease hazards.

Correspondingly, Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) are in consonance with the views espoused by Oh et al. (2012); Shih et al. (2008) that eminence is given to health issues based on the proximity of the pandemic, epidemic or disease. To them, the media serves as a first-hand source of issues and plays a vital role as informants to audiences as well as attitude influencers. In their study which sought to understand why the Times of India covered H1N1 as death related stories and how these death related stories were framed to readers, they concluded that editors choose what to report and what not to report. For instance, the news blamed government hospitals for death tolls without having a look at the role played by private hospitals as well as other institutions like the airports, schools amongst others.

In similar vein, Ihekweazu (2016) in her study examined how the location of the media served as a proxy for salience of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in the United States of America. She concluded that salience is attributed to location factor. In that, the closer the health issues to the audiences, the higher its notability from media houses and the farther the issue, the lower its salience. She adds that the inclusion of efficacy information to health issues in news stories aids in bringing out the realness of that issue which helps individuals and communities to relate more and know better ways

to respond to the crises. Its exclusion leads to vagueness. Unlike studies that saw the media as panic-inducing agent in news narratives, Ihekweazu identified that coverage of Ebola in the U.S was less dramatic and included more panic-reducing narratives. The study also challenged the theory employed. The study revealed that in as much as expert sources are deemed most credible in communicating health crisis or issues, it may not always be the case. Also, findings revealed that stories from laypersons on health issues can be deemed credible as they have lived experiences of the health issue and highly to influence audiences when covered in news stories.

In short, news frames employed in the coverage of health issues reinforce the perception people have. That is, the pre-conceived ideas embedded in the minds of audiences in relation to those issues. For instance, public hospitals have been perceived over time as incompetent in dealing with most health issues as against private hospitals. The media tagged public hospitals as not capable of containing swine flu (H1N1) in India which was not the case (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014). This supports Oh et al's. (2012) assertion that cultural factors play significant roles in news framing of health issues. Thus, within the Indian culture, public hospitals are tagged negatively in the minds of audiences hence; negative news frames revealed by the study reinforced the bad perception people have for public hospitals (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014). For instance, Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) in their discussions identified that the media employed strong adjectives and words like 'deadly', 'mysterious', 'medication inefficacy' and 'failure of life support systems'. Hence, analysing the risk of H1N1 qualitatively in describing infection rates and recovery rates instead of analysing H1N1 quantitatively which states figures without attaching explanations to the breakdown. They also pointed out that where two agenda entwine,

the issue gains more significance. That is the issue with more magnitude and often current in nature becomes news worthy.

Study by Rossmann et al. (2018) focused on finding out the truth as to whether the media's frame of the 2009 influenza virus A (H1N1) was dramatized or overhyped in newspaper publications, press releases and tabloids. In as much as the study stated the purpose of the media - the media is to communicate and educate publics during health crisis by:

1. Providing messages on the dangers, symptoms or cure for an ailment
2. Giving room for audiences to assess the dangers involved and ways of dealing with warnings attached to that health crises
3. Advocating the public to obey and adhere to instituted sanitary and precautionary directives with no attributable trace of panic or fear rather, with the aim of creating consciousness to minimise careless attitude.

The study made mention of the critiques the media has faced for providing inadequate and inaccurate messages in the execution of their duties. The study revealed that although the media chooses the kind of messages to disseminate to the public as an autonomous body, it however sources information externally in most cases making them information dependents which is likely to result in the receiver of inaccurate messages. Hence, the reason for sometimes relaying inaccurate messages. Rossmann et al. (2018) support the assertion that news sources that the media houses fall on for stories or information during health crisis reportage are mostly experts, public health institutions and the government. This information is mostly through press releases and conferences organised and relayed by public health experts, scientists, government officials and scientific journals. These sources are deemed credible and relied upon by

the media to provide timely information to the public. For instance the CDC's (Centre for Disease Control) releases on COVID-19 and that of WHO Johns Hopkins University were greatly relied upon to educate the masses on the virus and providing a timely global statistics on the spread of the disease. The study revealed that newspaper articles increase upon the announcement of the A/H1N1 pandemic alert level 6 by the WHO and peaked in July 2009 and also during the vaccination phase in November 2009 while press releases kept decreasing. However, in 2010/2011, both newspaper publication and press release on the pandemic paid less focus to the pandemic. Although the media worked in tune with press releases published by the government and health authorities, the latter dramatized the contents on the 2009 influenza virus more than the former. It was noted that the media only emphasises what it has gathered as news from the various sources of stories. Also, tabloids intensified and exaggerated the coverage of A (H1N1). The work revealed that media content showed to audience in an attempt of communicating a health crisis, whether it is being amplified or not are geared towards creating awareness of that issue and increasing audiences' knowledge of the issue in question.

A study by Parmet and Sinha (2017) focused on taking a second look at the US reaction to the 2014 Ebola outbreak as both awkward and anticipated. Although the outbreak lasted for a short while, response strategies emphasized fright-based dangers associated with public health issues. Health professionals over the years have anticipated for future disease outbreak, proposed forceful measures to contain these outbreaks and this has been amplified by the media in its reportage on pandemics. To Parmet and Sinha (2017), frights accompanying the Ebola outbreak in the US led to stigmatization and attribution of responsibility rather than channelling concentration on the effective ways of curbing the outbreak. The conception of panic and fear

regarding pandemics are fuelled by the future pandemic projections and accentuations from the media. The media amplifies the diseases due to the languages used to describe future disease outbreaks by public health officials and as established by the CDC, diseases are no respecter of boundaries hence the gravity attached to it. In other cases too, the media contains issues and rather report in soft tones and reassuring frames. On the contrary, as public health officials work in their capacity to contain disease outbreaks, country officials and part of its populace begin to stigmatize a group of persons by attributing the outbreak to their existence. The study revealed that although the 2014 Ebola outbreak in the US sparked anxiety, it was overblown. This was due to the sceptics towards public health officials and the blame directed at vulnerable groups. Also, though media's reportage may employ alarming messages with the aim of attracting the audience attention, it creates unnecessary blame of the disease on others and tags health officials as incompetent. This causes extensive fear in the global citizenry.

Generally, the declaration of a disease as a pandemic means serious business globally whether or not the disease is near domestically. To some extent, the media hypes pandemics (Kilgo et al., 2018) and this is with the intention of creating public awareness on the existence of such pandemics and related health issues. This stems from the fact that, Black Death and Spanish Flu have been recorded as deadly historically with over thirty (30) million deaths. These and many projections made into future outbreak of pandemics by the Institute of Medicine and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention has led to the conception of fear and panic which has also heightened the media's hype for pandemics (Parmet & Sinha, 2017). This has influenced society including journalist in both framing of pandemics and reinforcing what society knows. Also media's hype of pandemic as against actual cases is geared

towards warning audiences and influencing their attitudes to prevent, curb or control its spread. This however goes beyond the media's agenda to rather instil fear and panic which also affects the health of the public negatively.

2.2 Conceptualization of COVID-19 in the Media

News of COVID-19 travelled faster than the pandemic itself from its epicentre to other parts of the world (Depoux et al., 2020). This was due to the usage of instant messaging devices and presence of social media which circulated both right and wrong information about the pandemic. The quick spread of information could also be attributed to the mode of containment of the disease by the Chinese – isolation and quarantine of infected persons. This mode of disease containment has over the years been attributed to dreadful pandemics hence the cause for alarm and spread of both accurate and inaccurate messages about the pandemic. The outcome of this misinformation has resulted in fear, racism against people of Asian descends and a social media panic. Dong and Zheng (2020), add that the spread of information and misinformation about the pandemic is attributed to the use of prompt messaging technology and smart phones makes information sharing easier and faster. The exaggeration of news on COVID-19 by various social media handles led to increase in anxiety levels, stress and nervousness; hence causing threat to the mental health of the public. As media messages affects publics both positively and negatively, Dong and Zheng (2020) recommended that public health institutions and experts should be the only sought after source for media houses in reporting health crisis with the aim of minimising the effects health crisis messages have on audiences mental health as was the case of COVID-19.

A study conducted by Lin (2020) focused on sympathizing with China as the epicentre and the first country to be hit by COVID-19 across the globe. The study revealed that aside health authorities quick response and containment of COVID-19 as compared with the outbreak of H1N1 (swine flu), false messages were being spread on social media and various platforms aimed at causing fear, shaming and relaying hurtful messages against the Chinese which later transcended on people with Asian origin. Lin (2020) supports Dong and Zheng (2020) assertion that the spread of false information on social media handles causes fear and panic. She adds that powerful leaders and containers such as the media should abstain from abusing their power relating to the spread of information on COVID-19. Such abuse sometimes causes racism and cyber-bullying. Wen et al. (2020) in concord with Lin (2020) argue that, diseases should not be labelled as a race's possession and messages geared towards causing pain or triggering the emotions of others shared via social media handles, gaming platforms or digital platforms should be halted. In the case of COVID-19, some media outlets tagged the virus by race - 'the Chinese' virus (Lin, 2020). The news media are expected to cover issues professionally to the public and must desist from racism and cyber bullying as this has caused more health threats than the pandemic itself. The researcher iterated that this can be stopped when specialists as well as trusted authorities debunk such information. To Wen et al. (2020), the media must not be bias in its news reportage and must desist from headlines which jeopardize the mental and physical wellbeing of the persons.

A study by Jamil and Appiah-Adjei (2020) also revealed that the media on one hand provided accurate reportage on COVID-19 and on the other hand, the media also misinformed the audiences concerning the pandemic. Some factors attributed to the inaccuracy in reportage were that journalists are not scientifically trained to decipher

and filter between accurate and inaccurate health messages gathered from various sources hence misinforms the public and in most cases done unintentionally. Also, journalists do not have first-hand information because of the fear of being infected in the course of gathering data thereby relying on secondary sources for data.

The media, in most cases, have praised the West for their efforts in fighting diseases, pandemics and epidemics neglecting African initiatives in curing the epidemics in their countries like in the case of Ebola (Kilgo et al., 2018). In the case of COVID-19, the media praised Africa for their strategic plans instituted in curbing the virus with the limited and less advanced technologies and facilities in the continent as compared to the western world (Mahase, 2020).

A study by Ogbodo et al. (2020) focused on exploring the dominant frames adopted by global media's reportage of COVID-19 and the language employed in the coverage. It was established that the global media outlets combined both alarmist and soft words in their reportage. The researchers affirm empirical evidence that the media wields power in stimulating public opinions as well as decisions. Therefore, information flow during crisis either eases or heightens the risk or tensions of the crisis. Emphasis is made on news reportage as well as the tones accompanying them. In their study, reportage had shortfalls such as: overhyping, inaccuracies and inadequacies. This triggered fear and panic among audiences. They believed that, during health crisis, sources of news are keen to minimize false or near true information. Hence, medical experts/scientists are more reliable as opposed to politicians. The study concluded that although COVID-19 reportage employed soft works like hope, precaution, strength and defeating the virus, media coverage was very alarmist and overhyped.

In another study, Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020) looked at how four media organisations in the world namely: BBC, Al-Jazeera, CNN and the People's Daily covered the initial two months of COVID-19 outbreak. They noticed that the proximity value played out in their coverage because the closer the pandemic got, the higher the coverage. BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera's reportage led to racism and xenophobic attacks on Chinese and Asian descends in Europe, the US and Australia. This was as a result of mishandled health communication. This emphasizes Lin's (2020) assertion that the media abuses its power in reportage sparking a negative attitude among publics. Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020) assert that media's reportage led to panic buying and this is because of the mishandling of information concerning COVID-19 leading to an increase in uncertainty. Frames like economic consequences, human interest, attribution of responsibility and international relations were revealed. Economic consequence for instance was attributed to the fact that countries or governments cared for their citizenry hence put preparations in place to protect their citizens from the infection. Also, international relations because of the strategic alliances formed between governments across the globe to fight COVID-19 which was seen as a global threat. The study also supports Ogbodo et al.'s (2020) findings that COVID-19 was coined as alarmist by the use of adjectives like deadly and scary. However, Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020) revealed that as the disease spread to other counties, news reportage moved from pessimism to neutral and later to optimistic coverage with much advocacy on the observance of sanitary measures and debunking misinformation.

Again, Poirier et al. (2021) in their identification of frames employed in the crisis coverage of COVID-19 in the Canadian context purported that prominence given to the issue of COVID-19 made it very noticeably meaningful and memorable in the minds of audiences. In support of their assertion, Wahab et al. (2020) reiterate that

COVID-19 was given much prominence compared to other epidemics. Wahab et al. (2020) authenticated empirical studies on the media hyping of COVID-19 and framing it as deadly. However, the media educated and provided accurate COVID-19 information to the public. Wahab et al. (2020) focused on identifying dominant frames in COVID-19 news reportage in Indonesian and Malaysian newspapers. Thus, reportage contrasted each other. *Kompas* of Indonesia focused on conveying alarmist messages to the public whereas *Berita Harian* of Malaysia reported all COVID-19 news in neutral tones. The Indonesian newspaper hyped media coverage thereby supporting studies that the media exaggerates in its coverage of pandemics, epidemics and diseases. Thus, the media framed COVID-19 as deadly causing fear and panic. In contrast, the Malaysian newspaper's coverage minimised frames of fear and uncertainty, hence, no risk of being killed by news on COVID-19 before infection. Selection of news items were carefully and appropriately done and did not divert from the media's objective of educating the public. The researchers hinted on the fact that sources of information (COVID-19 related stories) were deemed trustworthy and reliable.

Furthermore, Nwakpu et al. (2020) aimed at identifying how the media framed COVID-19 and how the frames influenced audiences' perception and response. The researchers agree with Mutua (2020) as news coverage of epidemics and pandemics mostly rely on its nearness locally. To these researchers, the media's strategy in coining COVID-19 related news will determine audiences' behaviour. Thus, audiences either observe all precautionary measures geared towards spread minimisation or turn deaf ears to messages relayed by the media. Media's reportage on health issues are geared towards attitudinal change as established empirically (Rossmann et al., 2018; Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020). Also, in dealing with health

issues, the media in collaboration with health experts help create awareness with little or no panic on the path of the general public. In confirming whether the media influences audience, Nwakpu et al. (2020) identified two most dominant frames present in both media reportage and audience perception; thus, containment frame and fatality frame. These frames were identified in news reportage and were also emphasised in audiences' perception affirming that the media directs public discourse and the way audiences viewed the pandemic. Empirically, how media framed COVID-19 news affected how audiences viewed the pandemic with corresponding attitudinal change (Entman, 1993).

Unlike other researchers who believe reportage of COVID-19 was based on proximity value, Villena-alarcón and Caballero-galeote (2020) argue that news coverage of the pandemic concentrated on international news compared to the domestic coverage. In their study, they sought to investigate coronavirus media coverage on the Spanish public television. The study concluded that there was less transparency in media reportage at the expense of the general public health with the aim of protecting Spain's tourism. This affirms the school of thought that sees media as providing half-truth as well as failure in disclosing all information to audiences (Rossmann et al., 2018; Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020). Coverage commenced in an assuring tone but changed quickly to a negative tone causing a sparkle of fear and panic among audiences.

It has been opined that the media serves as a liaison between public health officials and publics during disease outbreak (Hubner, 2021). The researcher adds that because most journalists have little or no background in health, communicating what experts mean to the public are often hyped. To the researcher, the media relies greatly on various sources (experts like public health officials and scientists, governments and

international agencies like the WHO) for the health information due to their expertise on related topics or exposure. The media's framing of COVID-19 in its early reportage were mostly sourced from the citizens' perspective with little information from health officials and scientists (Hubner, 2021). This however contrasts other studies on diseases, epidemics and pandemics where the media relies greatly on health providers, scientists and the government (Oh et al., 2012; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). According to Hubner (2021), COVID-19 was framed as deadly and mysterious. This was reinforced by the global precautionary measure adoption - lockdown. Also, it was termed mysterious because scientists and health experts were silent due to the newness of the virus along with its uncertainty.

Shabir et al. (2020) are of the view that the media's purpose is to educate the public on COVID-19 pandemic as well as all measures needed to fight it. In their study, focus was on investigating how Pakistani English e-papers framed COVID-19. They found that the media advocated for a general involvement of the populace in minimising the spread of the pandemic. Also, unlike other studies where journalists' interpretation of scientific terms led to media over amplification of the pandemic which can be attributed to the lack of training in public health or scientific journalism, the Pakistani media communicated all health-bringing slangs in its simplest form with the same intent. Thus, the mass media plays a pivotal role in the survival of mankind, an extension of media awareness creation in controlling the outbreak of the pandemic with the aim of preparing the masses even before further damage could be caused through news reportage.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This section highlights two theories - Agenda Setting and Framing - that were employed to comprehend and elucidate media coverage of COVID-19 on selected Ghanaian online news portals.

2.3.1 Agenda Setting Theory

The media's function of setting an agenda for public attention is attributed to Walter Lippmann as far back as 1922 on how they shape public opinion (Zain, 2017). Zahariadis (2016) citing Cobb and Elder (1971) defines agenda as "a general set of political controversies that will be viewed as falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity...also, denotes a set of concrete items scheduled for active and serious consideration by a particular institutional decision-making body".

Birkland (2005 p. 169) defines agenda-setting as "the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention". Simply put, agenda setting is about giving salience or prominence to a particular issue at a point in time and it is highly influenced by the media, policy and the public. This study however focuses on the salience the media gives to health issues (COVID-19) and its influence on the public. Lim (2010) adds that agenda setting is about giving salience or prominence to a particular issue. Salience is given to the issue by measuring the number of stories containing the issue against the total number of stories. That is, giving weight to the issue during a specified period of time. According to Zahariadis (2016), issues are abundant, however, attention is rare. Therefore, in gaining the attention of the majority, issues must be prioritized.

However, the theory was well situated in literature by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The researchers argue that, the media gives salience to issues with the aim of attracting the attention of publics. Thus, the media consistently present issues to audiences with the aim of influencing them to think in direction of what they are been presented with. This gradual exposure results in audience giving salience to what the media projects over other issues. In their study which sought to examine the mass media's agenda setting capacity in the 1968 presidential campaign on Chapel Hill revealed that voters' views had been greatly impacted by the contents of the mass media on the election. This is to say that, voters paid some attention to the media's agenda regardless of its origin and who benefits.

The theory also attests to the fact that audiences may not give salience to issues the mass media gives; the media however succeeds in giving audiences something to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Thus, the more audiences seek news from the mass media, the higher the influence on what to think about. Prominence is given to an issue by means of making that issue more noticeable in news reportage (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014). Audiences' perceptions, values, focus as well as prioritization of issues are greatly influenced by the mass media. This is because the audiences who consume media contents have their opinions shaped by what they consume (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Also, audiences who are farther away from mass media content or information relayed by the media are less likely to have their opinions shaped (Zain, 2017).

In agenda setting, salience of an issue fades and tolls away hence, less media coverage. This is also known as the fluidity nature of an agenda (Rogers & Dearing, 1992). Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) highlight that when two agenda intertwines the issue gains more significance. An issue is therefore "a conflict between two or

more identifiable groups over procedural or substantive matters relating to the distribution of positions or resources” (Rogers and Dearing, 1992 citing Cobb and Elder (1972 p.32). Issues are societal problems that catch the attention of the mass media. According to Rogers and Dearing (1992), for an agenda to be set, activists push the issue to a position where it attracts attention and influences any of or all of the three agenda setting components namely; media agenda-setting, policy agenda-setting and public agenda-setting.

Media agenda-setting occurs when the mass media takes up an issue by serving as advocates of that issue whereas public agenda-setting is when the audiences take up an issue often with the aim of influencing the mass media for their support. Policy agenda-setting has to do with policy makers’ response to public agenda-setting and the media agenda-setting to either amend policies or silent the other two agenda-setting components. This leads us to the second level agenda setting.

Agenda setting theory has been employed in several studies to explain and conceive how the news media (radio, television, newspapers and online news portals) sets agenda and gives prominence to a specific issue and at what point in time salience diminishes for another issue to repeat the cycle. Also, the theory talks about how audiences’ opinions are shaped by their constant exposure to media content and on what they think about at a point in time. Better still, matters audiences deem as a priority at the expense of other issues. Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) in understanding how *The Times* of India covered death related stories of H1N1 used agenda setting theory as one of their theoretical frameworks. They concluded that the mass media sets an agenda for public opinion and influences its audience on what issues are deemed important or relevant. To the researchers, agenda setting theory builds the strength of opinion(s).

2.3.2 Framing Theory

Framing is traced to Goffman (1974) as an analytical tool. According to him, there are two actualities. The one in which everybody sees things as their original state and the other where reality is seen through someone's lens. Unlike the natural state where intelligence is not controlled, the social state plays on the intelligence of people through a means. Goffman (1974 p. 22) states, "Natural frameworks identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, and purely physical... Social frameworks on the other hand provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency..."

In his study, he explains that individuals understanding of events and issues are greatly influenced by the customs of the society and these persons give a myriad of interpretations to such issues based on their personal experiences. This is made possible because some actors veer into the natural world and take a section of it which is later presented as the world to society. The media, as a social framework, taps into the natural world and picks an aspect of that reality. It is later selected and presented to audiences to view that as a reality. Thus, the media perceive and create the reality through selection, elaboration and exclusion of issues. Ofori-Birikorang (2019) adds that to frame means to select and attribute salience to an issue or event.

Framing can be said to be the selection of a sub-reality out of reality and presenting it as though it is the actual. Framing analysis has been employed by various scholars to understanding how the news media coins news reports on the diffusion of information as well as the acceptance of public policy. Frames are used to collapse composite issues into simple ones (Littlejohn et al., 2011).

According to Entman (1993 p. 52) “framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”. In order for issues to be identified by the news media, framing is employed to communicate the existing problem to audiences. In the case of this study, although other issues needed the media’s attention, the media, however, selected and placed emphasis on COVID-19 as a general health issue.

The aim of the media in framing is to be able to interpret the issue. That is, defining COVID-19 in terms of its origination, mode of transmission, detection of infection and possible ways of prevention or minimising spread. Both the old media (television, radio, magazine and newspapers) and the new media (digital or internet) adopted various strategies to communicate with audiences in the definition of COVID-19. In playing the role of communicators, the news media together with the sources of news is guided by what to tell audiences as far as COVID-19 is concerned.

The news media is guided by ‘schema’ which is dominant in society and structured by their belief systems (Entman, 1993) or linked to the reasoning (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) of audiences. Publics belief with regards to the fatalities of pandemics have been reinforced through films and other media content that pandemics are fatal (Davis, 2014) as well as through historical records on pandemics. This spans from previous recorded experiences like the Black Death and Spanish flu. This has in a way reinforced society’s belief in the case of COVID-19 as has been presented to the public. Entman (1993) postulates that, although frames influence receivers on how to think about an issue, it may not necessarily be the case.

In news framing, catchy words are used to frame issues with the objective of influencing public discourse (D'Angelo, 2018). Four frames in news framing analysis are identified namely journalistic frames, audience frames, issue frames and news frames. According to the researcher, journalistic frames are the cognitive styles of individual journalists which are influenced by the news room discourse. Journalistic frames come to play when news stories are being reported or covered from a certain locus rather than that of the sources to which the stories are attributed to. Thus, journalists re-cover the stories from perspectives. These seem bias as these journalists are guided by their societal norms or cultural values and tend to have influence on the news they report. Although frames are attributed to the sources of the stories, journalists also re-position stories. Thus, frame news stories.

Also, issue frame is the second of the four frames. D'Angelo (2018) argues that the exposure of an issue relates to the sources of that issue. Hence, the strength of that issue to persuade audience is dependent on the source of the issue (D'Angelo, 2018). For instance, in health related issues, the media is highly likely to cover stories from public health officials, doctors, scientists and the government compared to a story from a layman. In the case of pandemics, the issue frame is a captivating argument when it is life threatening and either becomes a national or international concern. For instance news is either framed as deadly or fatal with emphasis on death rate because that is how the media will want all to view the pandemic (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014). News frames are reliant on issue frames which are somewhat influenced by the journalistic frames (D'Angelo, 2018). Regardless, issue frames originate from external organisations and agencies.

Audience frame on the other hand has got to do with the audiences' mental interpretation of issues concerning a topic. These are, however, influenced to some

extent by their social interactions with people or the society at large who are also active receivers of news. These frames are mostly expressed during discourses.

News frames also known as media frames include transcribed, verbal, graphical, and optical message modalities that journalists use to contextualize an event, issue, and/or person within one or more stories (D'Angelo, 2018). News frames simply communicates the issues through various means with the notion of getting to the receiver on how to interpret the issue. For instance, radio stations are consistently covering cases and have instituted public education messages on possible preventive and control measures of the COVID-19 disease. Online news portals have adopted a multimedia approach of conveying messages on COVID-19 with images of the cases, enforcement of precautionary measures as well as videos and written messages to convey something to readers, viewers and listeners and how they are to perceive the disease.

In the area of media research, framing theory has been used in several studies to explain and conceive how the news media (radio, television, newspapers and online news portals) frame or report news in a certain manner and in other cases how audiences receive and make sense of this reportage (D'Angelo, 2018). Shih et al. (2008) for instance employed framing as one of their theoretical frameworks in examining how print media framed public health pandemics: Avian flu, West Nile virus and mad cow disease. Natércia et al. (2010) also employed framing in their study to analyse the influenza pandemic coverage on the main Brazilian TV news which was caused by A (H1N1).

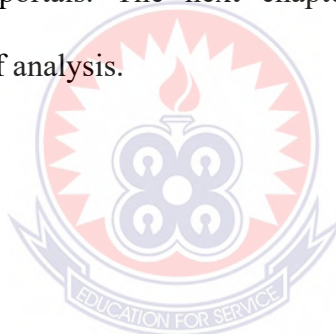
2.4 Relevance of the theories to the study

The theory of Agenda setting will help to know how the selected Ghanaian online news portals attracted attention or gave prominence to COVID-19 related news as well as the various strategies these portals employed in prominence creation of the pandemic. Also, the conceptualization of framing in both Natércia et al. (2010) and Shih et al. (2008) makes the framing theory significant to the current study. This is because the theory will help the researcher to examine how selected Ghanaian online news portals framed COVID-19 related news as pointed out in various issues emanating from the study. The study will also aid in validating the theories, giving further insights into the theory or challenge the existing theories.

2.5 Summary

This chapter sets out to review how the media covers pandemics and health issues in general. Most of all reviewed literature is situated in the western world with a few situated in Africa. However, there seem to be no study conducted in the Ghanaian context particularly. From the available literature, it appears that the media plays a vital role on how pandemics, epidemics and other health related issues are covered and reported to audiences. It has however become debatable as to whether the media to some extent exaggerates news reportage of pandemics and other related health issues, misinforms audiences by providing half-truth and gives salience to these issues based on their proximity value or otherwise. To the researcher, the media is a basic necessity that fuels citizens on the day to day affairs within a country, across countries and the entire globe. The media's role cannot be eliminated in the spread of information especially on issues that are deemed threats to mankind. Although the media may to some extent relay inaccurate messages, it can be attributed to the fact

that most on the field journalists do not have the right training in the reportage of specific and crucial issues including health related ones. The media however plays an effective role of disseminating credible information to a large extent. In the case of COVID-19, media's reportage concentrated on the sudden discovery of the virus, the swift mode of spread and that fatality rate. Also, drawing the attention of the global populace on the need to stay alert and encourage individual protection against the virus. Issues that are within the boundaries of persons are given relevance and this explains why the media gave salience to COVID-19 as their home countries and neighbouring countries recorded cases. The study was grounded on agenda setting and framing theories for better conceptualization of COVID-19 reportage on the selected Ghanaian online news portals. The next chapter describes the data collection methodology and mode of analysis.



CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This study seeks to examine how selected Ghanaian online news portals covered news on COVID-19. The chapter discusses the underlying principles for the methods and procedures for the data collection and analysis. In doing so, it examines the study's approach, design, sample size and sampling strategy, data collection methods and the procedure used for data collection and analysis.

3.1 Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research approach seeks to delve into and understand meanings individuals or groups attribute to human problems (Creswell, 2014). The focus of the study is on how selected online news portals covered news on COVID-19 from March 12, 2020 to April 20, 2020. That is, the study seeks to understand how the online news portals covered news stories in relation to the life threatening disease which has become a social problem to the world, and for that matter Ghana. Qualitative data deals with records of multifaceted relations and perspectives of experiences of persons and, therefore, records in texts rather than numbers (Richards, 2015; Lapan et al., 2012). This study employed a qualitative approach because news stories on COVID-19 on the selected online news portals were gathered from varying angles and perspectives of the citizenry and were documented in words.

Qualitative data is not only about language gathered and analysed from texts, documents, interviews and observation but also talks about an issue in its real life setting (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al. 2014). For this reason, a qualitative research

approach is used because news coverage is an activity that occurs in reality therefore, the study seeks to explore how selected online news portals covered news stories on COVID-19. Data examined were in the form of texts (content analysis of the online media portals and interviews with the news editors).

Qualitative approach further gives room for richness of data because the researcher who is a key instrument in conducting the research immerses fully into the work right from data gathering to data condensation through to analysis until the study is finalised (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). Although the issue of subjectivity is seen as an ethical issue, Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 16) citing Peshkin (1988, p.18) “goes so far as to make the case that one’s subjectivities can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected”.

Qualitative approach to research also seeks to understand how the world is constructed and the meanings people ascribe to the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, the lenses through which individuals are made to look at things as in how and what to see. For this reason, the researcher employed a qualitative study to understand how the media constructed issues on COVID-19 and presented to the Ghanaian citizenry through their lens.

Also, qualitative approach to research offers a thick rich description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). That is, arguments and imageries that accompany a phenomenon aid the researcher to make meanings or describe vividly that phenomenon. Also, excerpts from texts, quotes from interviews, images from documents or a combination of these are inclusive in supporting the findings of the study.

3.2 Research Design

Research designs are types of inquiry that provide specific direction for procedures in a research study (Creswell, 2014). In other words, research design informs the researcher on what laid down rules or plans to follow in order to execute a successful study. Thus, appropriate design selection is dependent on the nature of research, the research problem and questions, personal experiences of the researcher and the target audience for the study. Some examples of qualitative research designs include phenomenology, ethnography, case study, narrative study, grounded theory, qualitative content analysis among others. Phenomenology as a design is used when the study focuses on describing the lived experiences of several individuals of a phenomenon. Phenomenology looks at the commonality of human experiences that individuals share. Narrative design is used when the study focuses on reporting the life of an individual. That is the written text or spoken word that gives account of an event or a continuum of events and often relates to a single individual (biography) or a small group of individuals. Grounded theory on the other hand is used when the study aims at generating or discovering a theory. This design begins its study without a theory but ends with a theory that emanates from that study. The theory is obtained from the data obtained from the research participants who share a pattern but are not situated within the same premise or setting. Ethnography also emphasises on studying the shared patterns and behaviours of participants (individuals usually in larger groups). The researcher upon studying the participants immerses into the daily lives of individuals by living among them and observes and interrogate participants. Case study as a research design concentrates on exploring an issue within a setting. It could be a single case or multiple cases and involves an in-depth data gathering consisting of numerous sources of information. A qualitative content analysis was adopted as the

design for this study because it is used for categorising bulky sum of data in order to ascribe meanings to that data (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Also, it is a methodical way of understanding and defining the content of communication and used to analyse documents as well as authenticate theoretic associations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this reason, a qualitative content analysis was adopted as the research design for this study because it involves the analysis of massive data in the form of documents out of which meaning will be generated and be used to validate the theories underpinning this study.

3.2.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

To Given, 2008 (p.120), qualitative content analysis is “the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes”. Textual data can be in the form of print or electronic. They are grouped not mainly on counting but on examining critically the meaning of language in order to structure similar variables or languages that bare similar meanings and relationship into themes or groups (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Flick and Schreier (2014) argue that content analysis aids in analysing data in textual forms and ascribing meaning to the text. Similarly, the researcher studied electronic data which is a form of textual data. Electronic data are data transmitted or retrieved to or from a computer or any electronic device (Collins, 2021). For the purposes of this study, electronic data were the news articles gathered from *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com* on the coverage of COVID-19.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) contend that qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to fully immerse into the issue under study through a consistent and in-

depth reading of texts. This aids in key words identification from the data and the emergence of codes that are used to organise large cluster into subcategories based on the linkage of relationship between codes which are later organised into smaller categories. They further postulate that qualitative content analysis gives room to researchers to support their study with existing theory or research in the development of the coding process or the linkage of relationships between variables. In the same vein, the researcher upon careful and thorough reading of news stories identified keywords and grouped them based on their similarities. Codes were derived from the data as well as from some existing literature.

Unlike quantitative content analysis whose coding frame is tried on a material outside the study in focus, qualitative content analysis has its coding frame tried on the material under study to provide an in depth description of analysis (Flick, 2014). Also, content analysis is adopted by mass media especially when analysing news coverage. In the same direction, the researcher adopted qualitative content analysis as the design for this study because the study concentrated on a mass media on news coverage on COVID-19.

A number of works examining how pandemics were covered employed a qualitative content analysis as their research design. For instance, Smith and Tietaah (2017)) employed qualitative content analysis for their study which focused on coverage of an outbreak of meningitis in Ghana by selected online news portals. In the same vein, the researcher employed a qualitative content analysis because the study also focuses on news reportage on COVID-19 on selected online news portals.

3.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Sampling is selecting the actual data for the study from a large quantity of data (Given, 2008). According to Flick (2014), sampling is a systematic procedure, from the preliminary stage or the identification of a problem to an event or a phenomenon to the presentation of your work. Taherdoost (2018) avows that sampling technique is dependent on the focus of the study. That is, the research objective. In research, there are two types of sampling procedure namely the probability and non-probability sampling procedure (Wimmer & Dominic, 2011). The authors add that probability sampling employs the use of mathematical rules whereby each unit has an equal chance of being selected but non-probability sampling does not follow the use of mathematical rules. A non-probability sampling technique was selected for this study because it gives room for the researcher to select a sample based on judgement. Also, sampling in qualitative research helps the researcher to focus on the specific issue under study and for that matter larger samples are not really a necessity since the focus of qualitative sampling technique is to provide a thick-rich information for a specific people, situation or sites (Flick, 2014). The researcher employed purposive sampling technique which is a form a non-probability sampling technique for the study.

3.3.1 Purposive Sampling

Yin (2011) argues that a researcher's purpose of choosing a specific unit of study is to have those that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data that falls in tune with the topic under study. Etikan et al (2016) asserts that purposive sampling is a qualitative sampling technique used in only qualitative studies and with a major emphasis on permeation. That is, generating a wholesome understanding until no

essential evidence is acquired. The current study concentrated on coverage of COVID-19 on selected online news portals; hence, data was collected from the selected online news portals with concentration on the period where more salience was given to COVID-19 in news reportage by the selected news portals of the media houses in Ghana.

Also, Flick (2018) add that purposive sampling is employed with the view of selecting information rich instances aimed at answering the specific research objectives. Lindloff and Taylor (2002) citing Schwandt (1997) describe purposive sampling as a non-probability approach in which sites and cases are chosen because there may be good reason to believe that what goes on there is critical to understanding some process or concept. Thus, for the purpose of this study, the online news portals of Citi FM and Peace FM were purposefully selected for the study because both have a strong audience base (Geopoll Media Measurement, 2019). Traditional media influences the kind of issues posted on the online news portals of these traditional media (Lim, 2010). That is, the content of issues discussed on Peace FM and Citi FM influences what these radio stations post on their websites or the online news portals. This is known as media convergence. This was therefore transcended into the selection of their online news portals for the current study. Citi FM appeared first as the most listened to radio station in Ghana. Also, Citi FM is rated first amongst the most listened to English broadcast stations in the country. Peace FM on the other hand is the second most listened to radio station in Ghana. It also rated the first in the most listened to Akan broadcast station in the country (Geopoll Media Measurement, 2019). In studying the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic on online news portals, it became necessary to choose the two online portals because they resonate with the objectives of my study.

Importantly, the fact that Citi FM broadcasts in English and Peace FM in Twi also provided some language representativeness to the sampling. Barbour et al., (2018, p.385) define representativeness as ‘how well your sample of documents reflects the broader body of possible documents tied to the issue’. Also, Lapan et al., (2012, p.132) states that representativeness can be thought of in terms of appropriateness and completeness of the researcher’s sampling design’. Hence, the choice of Citi FM and Peace FM as the sample for this study gave balance to the radio stations limit in terms of stations that broadcast in English and Twi.

Two news portals were selected for the study, namely, *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*. Unlike quantitative study which concentrates on generalization of study, therefore requiring a larger sample size or statistical generalizations (Yin, 2011), qualitative study looks at a small and systematically selected sample size to enhance a detailed, holistic and thorough investigation of the data (Given, 2008). The study analysed all COVID-19 related news articles published on the selected online news portals within the stipulated time of study. The unit of analysis can be a text, sentence, paragraph and a news story (Mayring, 2014), therefore, this study concentrated on a news article on COVID-19 as the unit of analysis for the study. The period of study is forty days (40). Thus, from the 12th March, 2020 to the 20th April, 2020.

3.4 Data collection method

3.4.1 Document analysis

Documents are effective ways of gathering data (Creswell, 2009). Buckland (2018) defines documents as a textual or graphic record on paper, or an electronic medium. News articles are published on papers as print media and the integration of new media

has made it possible for news articles to be published electronically on the various online news portals of media houses. Electronic documents are easily accessed due to the archives kept by media houses on their online news portals. As a way of gathering credible data in answering the research questions, *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com* have archives that make making retrieval of the articles accessible.

Document analysis is the study of written texts either physically or electronically and its peculiarities (Buckland, 2018). Bowen (2009) postulates that, document analysis is a methodical way of going over documents; both printed and/or electronic materials (computer based and internet transmitted). That is, an explanative procedure that repeats itself in sampling, analysis of data and interpreting data. Document analysis, which is a form of qualitative analytical method, requires that data in the form of text been it physically printed or electronically generated be read thoroughly to extract meaning and gain understanding from the text. It also helps discover discernments important to this study. For this reason, the researcher employed document analysis as the method of collecting data. That is, electronic data were generated from the selected online news portals. These were thoroughly read to achieve the aim of understanding the data and making judgement to the study.

Bowen (2009) suggests that, document analysis should not be the only tool for data collection but rather, drawing evidence from multiple sources breeds credibility, help minimise biases and give a rich study. Thus, it is an efficient method since it consumes less time and is less costly. Also, documents are stable as the researcher's presence does not alter it and has a broader coverage. For this reason, the study therefore employed document analysis and interviews as the tool for data collection on which analysis was carried out.

3.4.2 Interviews

Interviews in qualitative research help to comprehend the views and experiences of social actors (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002) through news stories and explanations. Individuals are chosen to be partakers of interviews only when their views and experiences are keys to the research problem with regards to their skills and expertise that can help answer pressing research questions as well as meeting the criteria of the research objectives. Also, Braun and Clarke (2013) explain the term interview as a conversation carried out professionally with the aim of getting participants to share their views and experiences in relation to the issue under study. That is, interviews aids the researcher to answer questions in relation to how issues are constructed, views, comprehension and experiences in which the research participants hold some kind of interest or are directly affected or have a personal stake in. According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative interview implies that the researcher carries out one-on-one interviews with participants in person, via telephone calls, on the internet or through the engagement of a group of participant. Qualitative research interviews are not structured. It involves open-ended questions with the intent of drawing opinions from participants.

The current study employed an in-depth interview to investigate how the selected Ghanaian news covered COVID-19 news stories. The interview was conducted among the news editors of *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*. Codes were assigned to the news editors; Editor 1 for the editor of *Peacefmonline.com* and Editor 2 for the editor of *Citinewsroom.com*. This was to help understand issues that emerged from their reportage of COVID-19 stories and the accompaniment of news stories with videos and images. Interviews with these participants also aided to verify, explain, validate and clarify issues arising out of the study conducted on the content

of COVID-19 news stories on the online news portals of the two radio stations, *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

At the beginning of the data collection, I visited the websites of Peace FM and Citi FM after purposively selecting the two news portals as samples for my study. I searched for their news categories and found their news archives. I then searched for the month and later the date stipulated as the time frame for the study. That is, from 12th March, 2020 to 20th April, 2020 news stories. I retrieved 3,618 news stories out of which 2,382 were COVID-19 related news stories from *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*. *Citinewsroom.com* accounted for 1,121 stories and 1,261 news stories from *Peacefmonline.com*. The news articles I retrieved were pre-existing data that existed independently of the research process rather than a continuing activity.

I saved the URL for articles that could not be downloaded for easy access to them during coding. Downloadable news articles were downloaded onto my iPhone 8 plus. I later transferred the downloaded articles unto my Lenovo ThinkPad CORE i5 and saved the news articles as PDF files for easy access and reference. This falls in line with Ofori's (2020) counsel as saving retrieved data enables easier accessibility of the data in the course of the study. Data gathering required a smart phone and laptop with an internet connectivity to access the websites of the selected radio stations online news portals for a smooth study.

The researcher carried out a pre-research review on the online news portals of the two stations. Upon thorough reading of news articles, article by article, themes emerged. This aided in the development of a unique coding system, categorization and unit for

the document analysis log sheet. These thematic categories include: *Spread/ Bare Statistics, Disease Control, Consequence* and *Research and Development*. Some of the themes were adopted from literature, Natércia et al. (2010) and Oh et al. (2012) whereas others emerged from the data. Coding included categories like number of COVID-19 news stories, the story source, theme and the frequency of total news stories against COVID-19 news stories. Sources were coded when they were openly or plainly stated within the news article (Oh et al., 2012).

The data obtained from the content analysis of COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* was later supported by the telephone interview with the news editors of both sites. The main objective for the additional data collection was to provide a thickly richly description and a contextual setting for understanding the reportage of COVID-19 news content. Interviews with the news editors for both *citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com* were carried out on telephone. Since my iPhone 8 plus did not have an inbuilt recorder to record telephone calls, a Samsung A21 series was used for the phone call and the conversations were recorded alongside the mobile phone interview with my iPhone voice memo. The interviews were transcribed and analysed.

3.6 Data analysis

3.6.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis focuses on the implicit and explicit ideas within a data also known as themes. With thematic analysis, codes are developed to symbolize themes for analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Braun and Clarke (2006) also terms thematic analysis as a process of recognizing, investigating and reporting patterns (themes) within a data. They added that, themes represent some level of veined response or meaning within

the data set and are linked to the research questions. In line with these assertions, the researcher through a detailed reading of news articles generated from the selected online news portals for this study identified consistent and meaningful patterns. These led to the generation of themes and sub-themes in relation to specific research questions for easy interpretation of the study.

Clarke and Braun (2017), add that themes provide a structure that aids researchers to arrange and give account of the critical observations made by the researcher and provides a concise data content to assist the researcher to identify and make necessary meaning from data. Through thematic analysis, the researcher was able to reduce 2,382 COVID-19 news stories into workable meaningful data. Neuendorf (2019) explains that messages recorded aid the researcher to develop codes through an attentive scrutiny of data (text) as relevant themes inductively emerge from it. These codes could be in a form of words or consist of phrases and are modified and exhausted thoroughly until no more themes are found. Based on this assertion, thematic analysis was employed to generate themes from the collected data. This was done only from the reportage of COVID-19 news stories I coded. In answering Research Question 2 whose focus was on the frames used in the reportage of COVID-19 on *citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com*, I coded the content of all 2,382 COVID-19 news articles. Themes generated from the findings include: *Spread/ Bare Statistics, Disease Control, Consequence and Research and Development*. I construed the findings using theories from my theoretical framework and reviewed literature from my work to draw meaning and make analyses from the data. Excerpts from the news stories and interviews conducted with the news editors for both websites were also used to support analyses and deliberations.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Cypress (2017) defines trustworthiness as the excellence, legitimacy and frankness that qualitative research findings provide and the sureness that scholars have in those findings. Unlike quantitative data which uses psychometric instruments to check validity, qualitative researchers adopt lens. Creswell and Miller, (2000) state that the validity of a research can be enhanced through a number of items out of which the researcher employed three since the presence of two of them guarantees the credibility of the work. The adoption of an external reviewer or auditor to examine the facts in the findings of the study and ensure that findings are trustworthy enhances credibility and a thick rich description through the description of setting, themes ensure validity. Cypress (2017) citing Lincoln and Guba (1985) avers that credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are based on the apt of research practices which are evidently reflected in the research practices, analysis and the researchers reflexivity. To enhance credibility, peer debriefing is a qualitative research practice where persons familiar with the research review the work, provide support and challenge the researcher by asking hard questions about methods and clarifications. Triangulation was obtained by using a multi theoretical framework: Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory, and a multi data collection method: Document Analysis and Interviews. Also, as a lone researcher, who is a key research instrument in analysing data, interviews were transcribed to keep an audit trail in the form of a document. The researcher's biases were bracketed and did not in anyway affect the study to ensure that conformability was met.

The researcher provided a documentation of all research activities to a qualitative research expert who happens to be my supervisor in the progress of the study and provided expert directions as to how to conduct this research as means of achieving

dependability. Thick rich description was carried out by the researcher during data analysis as a way of enhancing transferability (Cypress, 2017). Themes were vividly described and were enhanced through the use of descriptive tools such as the frequency table as well as graphs. Through peer debriefing, inputs were made, errors were rectified and accuracy was ensured.

3.8 Ethical Issues

Merriam, (2009) citing Hewson et al., (2003) identified four issues in relation to internet research. Firstly, information obtained in internet research must be willingly provided by participants and are to be eighteen years old and beyond to validate this consent. That is, the participant from whom the information is obtained must be an adult and must provide the information freely without any duress. Secondly, information obtained from the participant(s) should be secured and confidential. The third of which is whether information retrieved for the study is a publicly available information or a privately available information and the extent to which information is ethically acceptable. The fourth and last ethical issue is about the creation of techniques to enhance a careful review of information by crosschecking with participants for clarifications and/or inquiries to enhance safety.

For the purpose of this study, information displayed for public consumption was used as the data for the study. Thus, the online news portals, *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* are readily made accessible to the public all year round. The purpose for this is to enlighten the citizenry on the day to day affairs that happens within the country and also across the globe. It is therefore ethically acceptable to retrieve information since its consumption is for the public. Also, news editors of the news portals, *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* willingly consented to grant

the researcher the requested interviews. The researcher also crosschecked all facts from the two news portals with their respective news editors with the aim of clarifying all misinterpretations given to the data generated.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research process and method of data analysis. The chapter accentuated the research approach used for the study along with a suitable design. The sampling method was highlighted as well as the sample size. Every stage of the study was backed by rationalisations suitable for the study. The method of data collection and procedure as well as analysis were discussed in detail with focus on the trustworthiness of the study and ethical considerations.



CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.0 Introduction

The study aims at investigating how *peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* covered COVID-19 news stories. The chapter deliberates on the findings from the data collected from the two news portals and the interviews conducted. Findings presented by the study are derived from the investigations carried out on the content of COVID-19 news stories together with relevant theories and related literature reviewed in Chapter two of the study. Data generated were streamlined into thematic categories and were critically analysed for easy interpretation. Descriptive statistics was used to enhance a graphical representation of the findings presented. The research questions that informed the data collection method and analysis are:

1. What is the nature of coverage was given to the issue of COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?
2. What are the frames used in covering news on COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?

The research question one focuses on the nature of coverage given to COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*. The nature of coverage given to COVID-19 was measured in terms of prominence. According to Lim (2010), prominence or salience is measured by the sum of all stories that focuses mainly on an issue within a definite period of time. In the course of giving prominence to an issue in news reportage, media houses enhance the issue by making it more noticeable and memorable (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014). In line with this, COVID-19 news was enhanced with images, videos, audios and graphical representations attached to the

text during reportage. Also, the source of the issue determines the coverage or media attention given to the issue (Rossmann et al., 2018).

4.1 RQ1: What is the nature of coverage given to the issue of COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?

The media is and remains a vital tool for information dissemination to publics (Davis, 2014). During the reportage of health related issues like diseases, epidemics and pandemics, the media plays the role of an educator by drawing the attention of audiences to the disease or pandemic and educates them with the aim of causing a positive behavioural change in audiences (Nwakpu et al., 2020). In the records of pandemic reportage, the media has contributed immensely to preventing or limiting the havoc infections of diseases, epidemics and pandemics would have caused by playing the role as front liners in alerting audiences on impending health threats and informing or educating audiences on the necessary precautionary and sanitary measures (Nwakpu et al., 2020). According to Nwakpu et al. (2020), the level of responsiveness audiences give to diseases, epidemics and pandemics are greatly influenced by the media's coverage of that health issue. Serwaa et al. (2020) add that, the higher audiences are exposed to media content in relation to health issues or diseases, the higher the level of their preparedness and a better attitudinal change whereas little media exposure to pandemics results in minimal preparedness with little to no attitudinal change on the part of audiences. In line with Serwaa et al. (2020), Smith and Tietaah (2017) add that importance given to health issues are dependent on media coverage of that health issue. Villena-alarcón and Caballero-galeote (2020) reminds that the sources of news stories that media houses cover plays a vital role in the setting of prominence. That is, the various sources that media houses gather their news stories from plays a pivotal role in giving salience to that issue or drawing

audience's attention to the issue. In this case, the source of COVID-19 news stories is core in gaining audiences attention and giving them something to think about. These sources could be experts (scientists, public health officials or doctors who are well vested with the pandemic and have the technical knowhow on the disease and possible ways of prevention or control methods), the government, lay persons (individuals who are living with the disease or persons closer to the infected ones) and international organisations (WHO, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) (Villena-alarcón & Caballero-galeote, 2020). The research question seeks to address the issue of prominence given to COVID-19 news reportage on the selected online news portals. Prominence of COVID-19 is measured by the *frequency* of the issue (COVID-19) in news reportage, the *enhancement* or post contents of the news stories, the *sources* from whom the stories are attributed to and the *propinquity* factor.

4.1.1 News Reportage on the selected online news portals.

Table 1: Frequency of News Articles for All Two Selected Online News Portals from 12th March, 2020 – 20th April, 2020.

	Cumulative		<i>Citinewsroom.com</i>		<i>Peacefmonline.com</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
News Stories						
COVID-19	2,382	66	1,121	31	1261	35
Other	1,236	34	1,010	28	226	6
Total News	3,618	100	2,131	59	1,487	41

Source: Field data, 2020

Table 1 above shows a total of 3, 618 news stories published within the period of study by *peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*. From the table, it could be

observed that, *citinewsroom.com* recorded a total of 2,131 news stories. However out of this number, news stories on COVID-19 reportage for the period summed at 1,121 (31%) whereas news stories on other issues were 1010 (28%). On the other hand, *peacefmonline.com* published 1487 stories within the same period. From this number, 1261 (35%) were COVID-19 stories while 226 (6%) were other stories. This shows that *peacefmonline.com* published more stories on COVID-19 than *citinewsroom.com*.

Table 1 also depicts a compilation of the total number of news items for both portals. Together, *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* reported a total of 3,618 news stories from March to April, 2020. Out of the 3,618 news stories published on the online news portals, 2,383 (66%) covered COVID-19 stories and the remaining 1,235 (34%) focused on other stories. This means that during the study period, news reportage concentrated greatly on COVID-19. Thus, media houses gave prominence through frequency to COVID-19 and it is evident in the total number of COVID-19 news covered within the study period.

Findings revealed that focus of coverage was more on COVID-19 as against other issues during the study period for both news portals (attributing to a greater number of COVID-19 news stories). This implies that in terms of prominence through frequencies, the news portals made COVID-19 issues more prominent than other issues covered.

Based on the outcome of the content analysis, the researcher sought for an explanation to the frequencies recorded. Analysis of the interview data revealed that the prominence in frequency to the COVID-19 stories was as a result of the pandemic being the most important issue of human interest at the time. The novel nature of the

pandemic and the uncertainty surrounding the disease made it necessary for the portals to educate and inform their audience about the disease. So, the news editor for *Peacefmonline.com* explained that:

Well, basically, that was the most important thing at that moment. COVID was the most important thing because it was related to our health and as I said earlier it was novel and no one knew the damages it could cause...we needed to give the latest news... (Editor 1)

His counterpart from *citinewsroom.com* also shared a similar opinion:

It is just what is prevailing now and the need for people to have that sense of awareness and know that this is quite serious so you need to look out for yourself and be more cautious. The media's job is to inform, educate and entertain. So as long as the disease has not left us, we have to keep at that job... (Editor 2)

Salience here is about the number of stories the media covered (Lim, 2010), as the case of COVID-19. This is evident in the findings of the study. Majority (66%) of the total news stories targeted and concentrated on the COVID-19 pandemic covered during the study period. Nwakpu et al. (2020) also concluded in their study that frequency is the number of times COVID-19 news is reported and that was a way the media attributed importance to the pandemic. In that line, the online news portals reportage gave salience to COVID-19 by repeatedly giving more coverage to the pandemic than other issues in Ghana.

4.1.2 Enhancement

Enhancement basically has to do with the visibility given to news stories. Thus, in an attempt to attract more audience to read news stories, certain elements are added to stories to increase or improve the value of such stories. Therefore, enhancements also

give prominence to news stories due to the fact that they increase the attractiveness and the desirability of audience attention to such stories. In the context of this study, the researcher deemed it important to examine the enhancements that accompanied the COVID-19 stories published within the period of study so as to establish the kind of attention given to them. From the analysis of data, it was realised that images were sometimes added to the stories while in other instances, images and videos accompanied the stories. Outcome of the analysis is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Enhancement Used In COVID-19 News Coverage by *Citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com*.

Categories	Cumulative Frequency	<i>Citinewsroom.com</i>		<i>Peacefmonline.com</i>	
		%	Frequency	%	Frequency
Images	1,692	71%	527	22%	1,165
Images and Videos	690	29%	594	25%	96
Total	2,382	100	1,121	47%	1,261

Source: Field data, 2020

The study revealed that a total of 2382 enhancements accompanied the stories published by the portals within the study period. These enhancements consisted of images only then images and videos. Data established that 1692 (71%) of the enhancements were images only. Thus, pictures accompanied the COVID-19 news stories to give more visibility to the stories. The remaining 690 enhancements, representing 29%, were images and videos. Thus, the news stories were accompanied by images as well as videos. Also, *peacefmonline.com* used a total of 53% (1261 enhancements) out of the total enhancements that accompanied the COVID-19 stories

published within the period of study and the remaining 47% (1121 enhancements) were from *citinewsroom.com*. Critical analysis of data indicated that *peacefmonline.com* used more images (49%) and less images and videos (4%) as enhancements that accompanied their stories on the pandemic. *Citinewsroom.com* however, used more images and videos (25%) as enhancements than only images (22%).

Thus, the selected online news portals utilised a variety of multimedia tools in presenting or reporting COVID-19 news stories. Every COVID-19 news story published within that period was enhanced with images and videos. From table 2, the online news portals used *images only* and *images and videos* to enhance reportage of COVID-19 news stories to their audiences. It is however noted from the table that *peacefmonline.com* used more enhancement in their reportage than *citinewsroom.com*.

Cumulatively, the use of *images only* from table 4 was higher compared to the use of *images and videos*. Out of the total number of enhancements used by the two news portals, 71% (2,395 enhancements) were only images. Thus, images of the safety protocols or COVID-19 tracker or meetings of stakeholders accompanied the stories to show more details of the issues being discussed in the news stories. For instance, in figure 1, the image of the COVID-19 app tracker accompanied the story published on April 13, 2020 on *citinewsroom.com* which reported on the launching of the COVID-19 Tracker App by the Vice President as an aid to boost government's fight against the spread of the virus.

Figure 1: A Screenshot of *Citinewsroom.com* Reportage on COVID-19 Stories that Employed Two Multimedia Content; *text and image*.



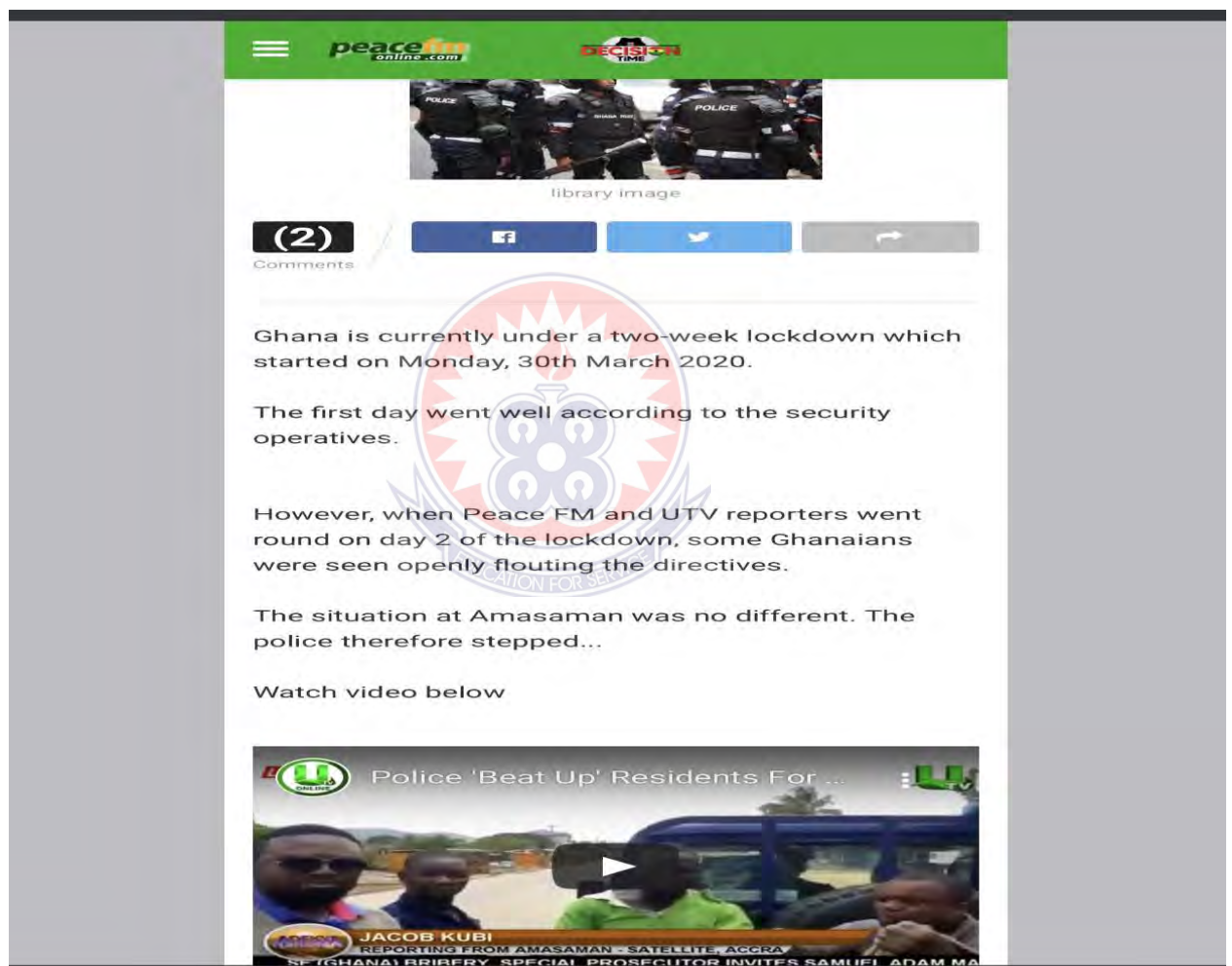
The image in figure 1 shows the enhancement given to the news story or the image attached to the text to attract the attention of audiences. The image talks about the Ghana COVID-19 Tracker App with directions on how to use the App. The application addresses all COVID-19 questions. As the name suggests, it is used to track all who have or show signs and symptoms of the virus and their location.

Besides, images were not the only type of enhancements used. The portals also used images as well as videos as enhancements for some of the COVID-19 news stories (29%). For instance on March 31, 2020, *peacefmonline.com* posted a story on how some Ghanaians were flouting the lockdown directives. This story was posted with an image of security personnel who were enforcing the directives at Amasaman.

The story had a combination of picture and video attached with the aim of giving importance to the reported story. The image of police tells of the Security Agencies

inclusion in the enforcement of the imposition of restrictions on Ghanaians. The video attached show how flouters of the lockdown directives were punished by the police for not complying with the restrictions imposed by the government of Ghana. Figure 2 below is a screenshot *peacefmonline.com* using image and video to enhance the story.

Figure 2: A Screenshot of *Peacefmonline.com* Reportage on COVID-19 That Employed *image and video*



In spite of the differences in the use of multimedia content in publishing COVID-19 news reportage, the news portals made use of multimedia contents as a way of giving prominence to COVID-19 reportage. *Citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com* gave prominence or attention to the coverage of COVID-19 by adopting the use of images

and videos (audio-visuals) attached to the text. This falls in line with Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) findings that salience is when a story or an issue is made more visible and unforgettable. In line with setting the agenda for the Ghanaian citizenry, the portals adopted various processes by which COVID-19 gained audiences attention at a point in time. This finding is affirmed by the interview data. The editors of the portals admitted that the use of such enhancements attract their audience to the stories and cause them not to forget the message from the story after watching the audio visuals attached to the COVID-19 news stories.

In this regard, editor for *citinewsroom.com* revealed that:

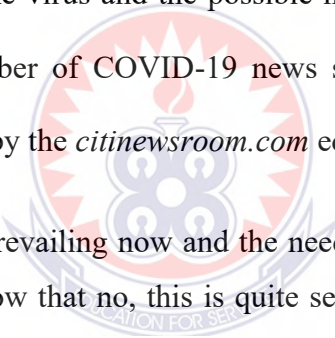
...If a story has images, the person will want to watch; you have a video, the person will want to click and watch. They must be on the platform for a long time...And the point is that pictures and videos literarily give you a better imagination and it sticks with you more than just text... It is deliberate to keep videos...it actually lives with them for longer than the text that you read and you see, also, people don't like to read for too long... to give them something more...something more to think about... (Editor 2)

Also, the news editor for *Peacefmonline.com* also shares a similar view:

You know whenever you have a story, visuals aid to tell every story better especially whether in picture forms or video forms. So it gives the readers a fair idea of how the COVID is causing damage... a lot of Ghanaians don't like to read a lot so when you have an image attached to a particular story, it gives them a fair idea or they'll be pushed to look at what is written beneath it or what the picture is attached to. Yes! So adding pictures to the story always tells the story better... (Editor 1)

In relation the media agenda setting theory, the media's consistency in presenting stories with enhancements (images and audio-visuals) was to influence audiences to tow towards the thinking of COVID-19. This falls in line with McCombs and Shaw

(1972) that the salience media gives to issues attract audiences. The various strategies the media adopted in channelling audiences mind to the issue of COVID-19 pandemic, that is, the use of images and videos. *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* gave prominence to the pandemic by making the pandemic more noticeable in their reportage by using varying means (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014). That is, employing enhancements by the news portals (images and videos/audio-visuals) and attaching them to the stories with the aim of attracting the eyes of the readers or audiences and to make them think in that line. Just as news consumption shapes audiences behaviour (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Zain, 2017), the aim of the news portals will be achieved by shaping the attitudes of audiences to think towards the infectious nature of the virus and the possible harm that comes with it and these were evident in the number of COVID-19 news stories reported within the study period. This is supported by the *citinewsroom.com* editor who claims that:



It is just what is prevailing now and the need for people to have that sense of awareness and know that no, this is quite serious so you need to look out for yourself and be more cautious... It is deliberate to keep videos... it actually lives with them for longer than the text that you read...and giving audiences something more...something more to think about...(Editor 2)

Hence, the reason for enhancing COVID-19 news reportage through the incorporation of enhancements in captivating the minds of audiences and setting the agenda, thus, making audiences think about COVID-19 and the need to stay alert. Also, the media gives salience to issues depending on its importance as news of an issue serves a purpose and gradually diminishes or is taken over by another issue (Rogers & Dearing, 1992), as is the case of COVID-19. The portals played a significant role as activists of the agenda setting process by prioritizing COVID-19 news stories over

other issues with the motive of gaining the attention of the Ghanaian citizenry and coupled with the use of enhancements in the publication of the COVID-19 stories.

4.1.3 Sources of COVID-19 News Stories

Sources of an issue play a vital role in the acceptance of the issue by the populace or the attribution of seriousness to that issue and these stories are sometimes obtained from news releases, press releases, press conferences (Rossmann et al., 2018). Rogers and Dearing (1992) affirm that the media agenda is greatly influenced by the sources of information the media seeks and it includes technical sources like experts, scientists', public relation staff and others as these sources supports the issue giving the media more credibility and stability in projecting the subject. Also, Rogers and Dearing (1992) add that the sources of news are topic advocates that push a cause for media agenda to influence public argument. Based on the foregoing, this study examined sources used in COVID-19 news stories by the portals.

To Natércia et al. (2010), the sources of news stories give credibility to the story and draw the attention of audiences to the story. Thus, news stories that are backed or authenticated by credible authorities have higher chances of influencing and attracting audience's attention to the news story. In the reportage of health issues such as diseases, epidemics and pandemics, information sources (government agencies, medical health practitioners, WHO and persons infected by the pandemic) are deemed very credible (Natércia et al., 2010.; Oh et al., 2012; Rossmann et al., 2018; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013).

Table 3 depicts the various sources that the two online news portals – *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* - relied on to gather COVID-19 news stories to the Ghanaian citizenry from March 12, 2020 to April 20, 2020. The

definition of sources cited from table 3 are informed by Natércia et al., (2010) and Oh et al., (2012). According to these authors, Government Agency or Officials are persons or agencies who provide official information to the Ghanaian populace concerning COVID-19. Also, they relay COVID-19 information on behalf of the state to its populace. Foreign Media/ International refer to all agencies or sources that are not from Ghana, thus, foreign sources.

The authors also note that experts entail researchers, doctors, public health officials with the professional or academic knowhow on the COVID-19 virus and provide novel information about it within the country. Politicians are persons belonging to political parties or occupying political positions other than the ruling government but are not eligible to the provision of official information or announcements about the COVID-19 virus. Pharmaceutical Company is a drug company within the country that provide medication for the management of the novel coronavirus. Others include all laypersons, organisations, chiefs, religious leaders and editors who are relevant, observed, or experienced the effect of COVID-19 but do not have the technical knowledge of the virus.

The sources of COVID-19 news stories within the study period are presented below:

Table 3: Sources cited in COVID-19 news stories.

Source	Cumulative		<i>Citinewsroom.com</i>		<i>Peacefmonline.com</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Government Agency/Official	414	28.9%	189	13.19%	225	15.71%
Foreign media/International	214	15%	72	5.1%	142	9.9%
Experts	190	13.2%	121	8.4%	69	4.8%
Politicians	94	6.6%	72	5.1%	22	1.5%
Pharmaceutical Company	2	0.13%	1	0.069%	1	0.069%
Others	518	36.17%	350	24.44%	168	11.73%
Total	1,432	100	805	56.3%	627	43.7%

According to table 3, a total of 1432 sources were cited in the COVID-19 stories published by the news portals within the study period. From this number, the dominant source was *others* with a frequency of 518 (36.17%). This was followed by sources from government agencies with 414 (28.9%); foreign media sources had 214 (15%); and experts sources with a frequency of 190 (13.2%). Also, political and pharmaceutical sources had 94 (6.6%) and 2(0.13%) respectively.

Comparatively, *citinewsroom.com* used more sources in their stories than *peacefmonline.com*: a total of 805 sources (56.3%) against 627 (43.7%) respectively. Table 3 again depicts that most of the sources used by *citinewsroom.com* used more fell in the category of *others*. Out of the total of 805 sources (56.3%) from the news portal, 350 (24.44%) were from others, 189 (13.19%) were from government

agencies, 121 (8.4%) were from experts, 72 (5.1%) each were from foreign media and politicians, and 1(0.069%) was from a pharmaceutical company. On the other hand, peacefmonline.com dominantly depended on sources from government agencies. From the total of 627 (43.7%) sources used in COVID-19 news stories within the period of study, 225 of them (15.71%) were government sources. This was followed by others sources with 168 (11.73%), foreign media sources with 142 (9.9%) and experts sources with 69 (4.8%). Political sources were 22 (1.5%) and a pharmaceutical source (0.069%).

Critical analysis of the above findings show that whereas citinewsroom.com was dominantly dependent on others sources, peacefmonline.com largely depended on government sources. Cumulatively, others sources had the highest percentage in relation to other sources cited (36.17%). It can be argued that this was because all were affected by the virus and aired their concerns, fears and worries together with advices geared towards the fight of the pandemic. For instance, religious leaders like pastors advised church members to observe all instituted and sanitary measures (citinewsroom.com). Traditional rulers ensured that their indigenes adhered to all precautionary measures and calmed them of fears generated from speculations (peacefmonline.com). Also, the fact that laypersons or non-experts ranked highest can be attributed to the democratic nature of Ghana. That is, the views of all citizens are heard notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is in consonance with outcome of Oh et al's. (2012) study on the coverage of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic in US and South Korea. They also found that more laypersons were sources of news in US compared to South Korea. The authors justified their finding with the assertion that the US supports public opinions and freedom of the press better than South Korea. Same can be said for the coverage of COVID-19 in Ghana. Opinions of others

ranging from the press, traditional leaders, various religious leaders and the entire populace were present and sought after to balance news content and to have diverse outlook. The Kwahu Traditional Council under the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs for instance, issued a press release which was sourced by peacefmonline.com:

All natives of Kwahu who currently live outside Kwahu should endeavour to continue to stay wherever they may be, in the weeks to come and postpone all planned visits to Kwahu till further notice...do not shake hands, hug or embrace...the virus moves when you move...

Source: Peacefmonline.com (Paragraph 2, line, 3 March 26, 2020).

Government agencies/officials were the second most recorded source of COVID-19 news (28.9%). This can be attributed to the fact that the country, led by the government was at the preparation phase of curbing fewer cases it had recorded at the onset to prevent the pandemic from overwhelming the citizenry. Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013) in similar vein concluded that government was sourced more by the media as the government of Netherlands pursued measures to mitigate the spread of the 2009 influenza A, hence, causing a significant trigger in more media coverage. Also, government officials/ agencies were second highest because they are unswervingly liable for the safekeeping of the citizenry against the pandemic (Natércia et al., 2010) and this is evident in the government of Ghana's reassuring messages (peacefmonline.com) the consistent update of the country's COVID-19 status (citinewsroo.com) and the instituted measures instigated to control the spread of the virus (peacefmonline.com). A government official in the person of Health Minister updated Ghanaians on the measures taken by the government in the containment of the virus:

We have now created a quarantine centre at Tamale and this afternoon we have put in 10 tested positive cases. All the 10 in Tamale are foreign nationals. Information we have from the case management people is that all those who tested positive are in very good condition. They have started engaging them... We are also deploying the facilities with drones to start flying some of the samples and protective products. This network is seriously triggered with the support of the military and we believe we can reach anybody as quickly as we have to...

Source: Citinewsroom.com (Paragraph 3 & 6, March 29, 2020).

Foreign media/international sources placed third (15%). This is attributed to the nature of the pandemic. The global society was affected by the pandemic. Also, the fact that COVID-19 was imported into the country required a constant update from the epicentre as well as international communities like the WHO on the new and effective methods of managing infected cases, possible drugs or vaccine development and spread projections. For instance, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warns the general populace not to wear masks if not sick:

There is no specific evidence to suggest that the wearing of masks by the mass population has any potential benefit. In fact, there's some evidence to suggest the opposite in the misuse of wearing a mask properly or fitting it properly...

Source: Peacefmonline.com (Paragraph 2, March 31, 2020).

Experts were the fourth in line (13.2%) and this stems from the fact that the virus was new to Ghanaian researchers. This finding supports the fact that at the earlier stage of the pandemic, experts were still at the discovery stage of the virus and its makeup, hence, needed to stay still to be sure of scientific hypothesis and to prevent fear among populace since the experts are mostly relied on during the outbreak of infectious diseases (Hubner, 2021).

However, apart from the updates from international sources, experts were responsible for the management of the virus within the country and updating the government on discoveries and developments in the management of these cases together with internally generated therapies for infected cases. Also, experts' voices in the reportage of pandemics are deemed as a rich news source with the ability to influence audiences (Coleman et al., 2011). In agreement with Ihekweazu (2016), they provide first-hand information on the nature and behaviour of the virus in Ghana as well as the best precautionary measures to adopt. For instance, the Ghana Science Association advocated for coronavirus scientific research in a statement signed by Professor Nathaniel Owusu Boadi and Prof. William Gariba Alanwariwiak, Honorary National Secretary and National President of the GSA on March 31, 2020:

...advocating support for scientific research into finding an expedited cure for the COVID-19 disease...calls on the Centre for Plant Medicine Research to bring together herbalists and traditional medicine practitioners or individuals with potential herbs, drugs, medicines for experimental analysis for the treatment for the COVID-19 by mandatory institutions The public is to exercise self-discipline, adhere to hygienic practices and lockdown measures put in place so far...the media should verify the authenticity of information , messages being put out related to COVID-19...

Source: Peacefmonline.com (Paragraph 2, 3, 8 & 9, March 31, 2020).

Politicians on the other hand ranked fifth (6.6%). This can be attributed to the fact that within governments, there are opposing elements who will want to be heard or in other cases politicise decisions and strategies to fight the pandemic by the ruling government. Politicians on the other hand tend to serve as a check on the government in the role out of strategies that may not deem fit. The minority leader demanded for briefing from Health Minister on the fight against COVID-19 in Ghana:

I also understand that the Chinese government gave some assistance to the Republic. The Minister of Health will have to come to this House to apprise us on how he is dealing with matters relating to that and how the distribution relative to the need for PPEs to support them [Health Workers] is going...But, more importantly, Mr Speaker, the Finance Committee of this House must meet immediately and consider those matters and report same...

Source: Citinewsroom.com (Paragraph 4 & 6, March 31, 2020).

Pharmaceutical companies were the least cited source (0.13%) and this can be attributed to the dependent on foreign drugs and medications for the management of COVID-19 against internally generated medications. The Ghana Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association was sourced for their stand in fighting the virus by citinewsroom.com:

With regards to the supportive treatment, we are also prepared; we have the machines and the lines to be able to do that. I have asked manufacturers to put aside their normal production schedules and bring up products that will be used to support the fight against COVID-19 and also make sure those products are easily available...

Source: Citinewsroom.com (Paragraph 4, March 17, 2020).

News sources serve as the foundation on which the media lean on to highlight the issue (Rogers & Dearing 1992). From the findings of the current study, data revealed that information provided by *citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com* was mostly generated from the category of sources outlined by Natércia et al. (2010). This falls in line with Rossmann et al. (2018) who posit that the media relies on such category of sources for information on the health issue before publishing or reporting to the populace. Thus, government sources, experts, individuals and organisations are key in news publications. This makes media houses information dependents although they

chose how to couch and what to report after this information has been given to them by the various sources.

4.1.4 Propinquity

In giving salience to COVID-19, the current study identified that the nearness of the pandemic to Ghana and its presence in Ghana caused media houses to place more emphasis on the pandemic. Thus, COVID-19 news was more noticeable when neighbouring countries and Ghana begun recording cases of infection. The nearness value factor was confirmed by the *citinewsroom.com* editor:

I think that this plays on the human natural inclination that when something looks far away from you, you cannot consider it as much of a threat... look at the distance between China and Ghana, you know! Of course if Europe hadn't even recorded a case then, why should Ghana, far away in Africa, be really bothered? And so naturally, the proximity value is of importance when it comes to news consumption and what you give to your people... so naturally we expect that until recording cases, we're not going to create the attention in this sense so, that is just how news plays out... (Editor 2)

The news editor for *Peacefmonline.com* shared a similar view:

As you said, the proximity value sets in because of the closeness. The closeness to the virus especially we as Ghanaians are put at high risk. So while it was drawing very nearer, it became an issue. So definitely there will be a sudden high intensity of reportage. Of course you know, when it is coming, the probability of you getting it is high. So you need to input fast news, you need to make people aware of what is on its way coming and the dangers involved... (Editor 1)

This falls in line with findings by Oh et al. (2012) as news coverage only increased as the US seven cases of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic but recorded a gradual decrease in news reportage after the peak of the pandemic. They also identified a similar pattern

for Korea as news articles shot up for 2nd May, 2009 to 6th May, 2009 when Korea perceived her first case of the H1N1 pandemic. Also, news coverage of the H1N1 pandemic climaxed in Korea after it recorded its first suspected death. This is in consonance with the current study which identified that the news portals gave attention to COVID-19 when the country recorded her first cases. In a study by Shih et al (2008) which sought to discover how public health issues were framed by the print media, findings revealed that prominence given to health threats in the New York Times was mainly dependent on the closeness of the epidemic. The study found that although mad cow disease and avian flu were primarily a world-wide outbreak, West Nile outbreak occurred in New York State. For this reason, the New York Times devoted a section of the paper where important issues were published for West Nile disease reportage. This means that attention was given to only the disease because the infection was in New York State against those that were nowhere near the state. Findings from the data falls in line Shih et al's (2008) assertion. Thus, as the news portals gave more frequency and enhancement to COVID-19 news stories publication as a result of its presence in Ghana unlike it was in China. Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) in their study that required understanding why and how H1N1 death related stories were framed and presented by The Times of India established that out of (62) stories, eighteen (18) stories appeared at the front page of The Times of India and this is attributed to the first H1N1 death recorded in the India. This means that had the country not recorded any death case, it would not have published that much stories on the most noticeable page of the paper. Same can be said for COVID-19 news stories published on the news portals and can be attributed to the fact that the first death case ignited more coverage on the news portals. Although Smith and Tietah (2017) do not support the issue of proximity value as a means the media adopts in giving salience to

health issues, as findings from their study revealed that the Ghanaian media gave less coverage to meningitis despite its presence in the country, the current study supports and reinforces the issue of propinquity as a means through which the media in Ghana, specifically, *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* gave salience to COVID-19 in Ghana.

4.2 RQ2: What are the frames used in covering news of COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?

The research question addresses the frames that used from the media coverage given to COVID-19 by *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*. In line with Goffman (1975), the media, serving as a social framework, chose to present the pandemic in a way so that audiences will view the pandemic in that direction. That is, selecting some aspects of the pandemic as news and presenting them to audience as though that is all COVID-19 is about. In other words, the complexities of COVID-19 pandemic are collapsed into simpler terms and highlighted by giving salience to some aspects of the pandemic. Entman (1993) simply put framing as a strategy that the media adopts to communicate an existing problem to audiences. In relation to this study, the strategies the media adopted or used to give meaning, create awareness and influence behaviour of audiences towards the COVID-19 pandemic and the way of presenting the message through some lenses is termed framing.

The media did not only draw the attention of audiences to the pandemic rather, they also chose how audiences ought to think about the pandemic. COVID-19 was presented to audiences to think about as a pandemic through the first level agenda setting while the second level agenda setting also known as framing made selections from the pandemic with the view of making audiences see COVID-19 in a particular

manner and in line with the directions the media presented the pandemic. To answer research question two, a news story was used as a unit of analysis to categorize issues covered within the period of study into themes. From the categorization, it was discovered that the media houses chose the following as the lenses through which audiences were expected to view the pandemic: *Research and Development, Disease Control, Consequence and Spread or Bare Statistics*. Frames were selected based on its dominance in a news article.

Table 4: Frames that emerged from the reportage of COVID-19 news on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*.

Frames	Cumulative		<i>Citinewsroom.com</i>		<i>Peacefmonline.com</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Disease Control	1,358	57%	739	31%	619	26%
Bare Statistics	476	20%	333	14%	143	6%
Consequence	381	16%	262	11%	119	5%
Research and Development	167	7%	95	4%	72	3%
Total	2,382	100	1,418	60%	952	40%

Source: Field data, 2020.

4.2.1 Disease Control Frame

Table 4 indicates that the dominant frame used by the news portals in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was disease control. A total of 1358 news stories (57%) had this theme. From this number, 739 (31%) was from *citinewsroom.com* and 619 (26%) from *peacefmonline.com*.

This frame was dominant for both *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*. Disease control frame can be defined as all strategies taken by the government and its officials, organisations or businesses and citizens against the spread of the disease and its containment. It includes all health measures, responsibility assumption by the government, advice and aids from stakeholders. The indicators of disease control frame are health and precautionary measure, advice/ proposition, donation/ aid and attribution of responsibility. Analysis revealed that the government and the entire citizenry were very concerned about the welfare of the Ghanaians, hence, the need to protect all from the shackles of the pandemic. The dominance of this frame may be attributed to the reason that the novel nature of the pandemic and its devastating impact on human lives, hence, a great focus on all measures put in place towards the fight against the pandemic. For instance, the two week lockdown and fumigation exercises carried out are examples of disease control frame.

The study revealed that health and precautionary measures were put in place by the government of Ghana and its officials/ agencies, organisations and the citizenry with respect to obeying the instituted directives to help fight the spread of COVID-19 in Ghana. This includes lockdown directives, closure of borders, observance of social distancing, wearing of nose masks or face shields and sanitary measures like cleaning and disinfection of markets/ schools/ houses, washing of hands, installation of Veronica buckets with soap. An excerpt of a statement issued by the Ashanti Regional Minister, Simon Osei-Mensah on the additional measures in ensuring that community spread of coronavirus is curbed in the region as a health and precautionary measure is presented below.

All special market days of the various markets in all communities within the Ashanti Region are indefinitely suspended. Anyhow who engages in these

activities will be arrested by the Security Agencies and prosecuted by the Court of Law with all sanctions applied under the Imposition of Restriction Act 2020 (1012)...However, daily market activities in various communities will go on as usual

Source: Peacefmonline.com (Paragraph 4, 5 & 7, April 9, 2020).

The study also found that in controlling the disease, advice/ proposition was given to the Ghanaian populace by members of state, individuals, traditional rulers and all who have the wellbeing of Ghanaians at heart. These include the consistent reminder directing Ghanaians to wear their nose masks, regularly wash their hand and observe all protocols instituted by the government. Also, they were to stay at home if they had nothing doing outside. Besides, all the requests made by individuals, members of state asking the citizenry or the government to consider a request or a plea on behalf of the petitioners were also included. In a news story which recommended the government for measure taken to curb the spread of the pandemic, Oheneyere Gifty Anti advised Ghanaians on the need to observe all instigated protocols. An excerpt is presented below:

Let's take this thing serious. People are joking with this...We're joking with it...Let's protect ourselves and kid with this

Source: Peacefmonline.com (paragraph 12 April 9, 2020).

The study also established that in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Ghana was assisted with donations/ aids from other governments, individuals and organisations within and outside the country. These donations include giving sanitizers, PPE's and cash or cheque to hospitals, food items to people and contribution towards the COVID-19 fund. For example, an extract from a news story

on a donation exercise published by citinewsroom.com indicated the Regional Senior Vice President of Newmont Africa said the following:

In light of the logistical and infrastructure constraints around the country's public health system – along with the needs of our local health institutions in our host communities – we have set aside a US\$ 100,000 package to support the country's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Citinewsroom.com (Paragraph 4, March 31, 2020).

Findings from the study also showed that the government bore most of the responsibilities that citizens were to bear as a result of the various disease control measures it had instigated. This was done through electricity and water subventions, provision of accommodation and food by the government to head porters who were affected by the lockdown. For instance, in the statement made by the Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Mrs Cynthia Morrison during a press briefing, she noted that

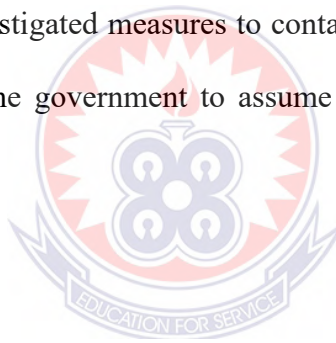
For those who have apartments, we will find ways of sending logistics to them to keep them away from coming to town and those we going to keep, we are going to cater for them. There's going to be enough food, there's going to be enough water...some corporate bodies are cooking for 6000 and another group cooking for 4000 people

Source: Peacefmonline.com (Paragraph 9 & 11, April 1, 2020).

The prevalence of the disease control frame evident in the various strategies adopted to control the pandemic by the government resonates from the fact that the fight against the pandemic accompanied with the various responsibilities can be greatly borne by the government of Ghana. Also, advice given to the citizenry was to pinpoint the fact that in as much as the government is doing all things in its power to contain the spread, individuals were to play their part by practicing and obeying all instigated

protocols as a way of staying safe or avoiding infection. This frame may also result from a cultural perspective which is often found in the adage ‘each one for himself, God for us all’. Thus, the government will do its part to fight the virus yet the citizenry must play their part.

The above findings resonate with Oh et al's (2012) study which discovered that the action frame (which is similar to the disease control frame in this study) was dominant because the governments and citizens of US and South Korea were concerned about H1N1 pandemic in 2009. Again, their study also revealed that action and attribution of responsibility frame were dominant and this is due to the belief that deliberate efforts made by Americans could minimise the spread of the H1N1 virus in as much as the country had still instigated measures to contain its spread. Also, Americans had more expectation from the government to assume the responsibility in fighting the epidemic.



4.2.2 Bare Statistics

In table 4, findings indicated that a total of 476 (20%) news stories supported this theme. In comparison, more stories from *citinewsroom.com* (333 representing 14% out of the total number) had this theme while 143 (6%) were from *peacefmonline.com*.

Bare statistics frame was the second most used frame in the coverage of COVID-19 news for both news portals. This frame did not only state figures of cases but *citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com* also gave detailed explanations attached to the figures. The media gave a total breakdown of cases which included a progressive report. That was to inform the citizenry on the total figures with respect to infection, rate of the recoveries, number of deaths and the various reasons that

accounted for even the fatalities or deaths the country recorded. Indicators for this frame include number of cases, discharges made, cases being managed at home due to their mild severity, suspected cases and COVID-19 deaths and underlining factors. The reason deduced from the data was because the country wanted to alleviate fear out of the citizenry and rather instigate hope in the sense that COVID-19 infection was not a death sentence. Unlike findings from Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014), where the Times of India adopted the use of strong adjectives in the explanations of the 2009 H1N1 cases in India which chose to heighten fear in audiences, findings from the data of the current study revealed that the Ghanaian media employed a quantitative risk measurement approach to update Ghanaians on the country's case count. The excerpt below from *Peacefmonline.com* supports the assertion above.

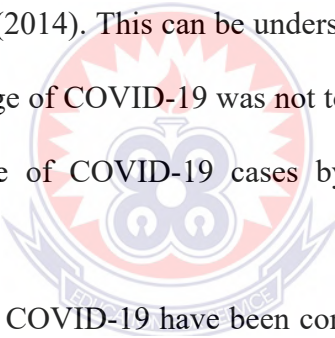
As at the morning of 26 March 2020, a total of fifty-four (54) cases including three (3) deaths have been confirmed from the regular surveillance systems. All three (3) cases that unfortunately succumbed to the disease were aged and had underlying chronic medical conditions. All the other fifty-one (51) cases are well; fourteen (14) are being managed at home and the rest are responding well to treatment on admission in isolation...the number of cases among travellers under mandatory quarantine who have been tested is seventy-eight (78) bringing Ghana's cases at 132

Source: Peacefmonline.com (paragraph 2, March 26, 2020).

The extract above gave a vivid explanation to recorded cases in the country. Deaths were supported with underlying reasons with the intent of minimising the fear caused by the pandemic and clearing the notion that one is bound to die when the disease is contracted. Also, explanations given to active cases were geared towards giving hope of recovery to the Ghanaian citizenry who have contracted the virus. The presentation

of recorded cases was supported with figures in the course of stating the current pandemic status in Ghana.

Oh et al. (2012) identified bare statistics as a frame with focus on giving the statistics of the pandemic to the citizenry. The current study however identified that the Ghanaian media did not only issue figures, it went beyond to support the figures with explanations. Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) citing Hong (2007) identified that the severity frame was due to the amplified reportage of SARS figures by journalists and was similar to the findings from Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014) as reportage only concentrated on deaths of H1N1 which was likely to spark fear and panic among Indians. The current study however did not identify the pattern as identified by Krishnatray and Gadekar (2014). This can be understood in the sense that the media's motive during the reportage of COVID-19 was not to spark fear and panic. Below is a news story on an update of COVID-19 cases by the Ghana Health Service on *citinewsroom.com*.



Nine new cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in Ghana as at 2nd April, 2020, increasing the country's total case count to 204...four of them have no travel history or contact with confirmed cases. The other four have no travel history but are contacts of confirmed cases in Ghana: one travelled to Ghana from Benin within the past 14 days...the number of deaths remains five, as the total number of those who have recovered stays at three...

Source: Citinewsroom.com (Paragraph 1, 2, 5 & 6, April 2, 2020).

4.2.3 Consequence

Data in table 4 revealed that a total of 381 (16%) news stories employed the consequence frame. Out of the number, 262 (11%) were from *citinewsroom.com* whereas 119 (5%) were from *peacefmonline.com*.

Consequence frame appeared third most dominant frame and this includes all outcomes from the pandemic being negatives and positives. In other words, consequences are the effects or the aftermath accompanied by the pandemic. Consequence is often seen as a negative impact. However, the pandemic brought about the taking up of initiatives that brought about positive outcomes from the pandemic. Indicators of consequence frame encompass fear and uncertainty and economic impact both positives and negatives.

The study discovered that the result of the pandemic contributed to the inception of fear and uncertainty among the Ghanaian citizenry. Thus, Ghanaians perceived COVID-19 as a threat to their lives coupled with doubts surrounding certain actions taken by the government. This resulted into demonstrations against the selection of facilities as quarantine centres as citizens did not have better understanding of the pandemic under discussion, extreme and cautious attitude due to an infection rumour in a locality and fear of the pandemic as a death sentence. In support of this finding, residents in Teshie expresses fear to *citinewsroom.com* in the extract below.

We are in fear... my mom came home and told us there is one hospital staff who is infected so we should be careful. So we are all in fear now because she sells at the roadside and for me, I am afraid for her...

Source: Citinewsroom.com (paragraph 7, March 31, 2020).

In furtherance, the data postulates that COVID-19 impacted the economy of Ghana negatively and positively. This informed the various economic decisions that were made by the government. These include boosting of locally manufactured nose masks and hand sanitizers. Positively, the pandemic led to the generation of income internally. Due to the closure of borders, trading was halted. Thus, the importation of personal protective equipment (PPE) to be used by the Ghanaian citizenry and

hospitals in fighting the virus as a means of protection was on a hold and in short of demand globally (Nii Larte Lartey, *Citineewsroom.com*, 2020). This ignited initiatives to commence production of PPE locally. Local production meant that buying and purchasing were taking place in the country without any income leaving the country in the form expense of importing these items. An instance of the President of Ghana actively engaging local manufacturers on *citineewsroom.com* is presented below.

... Domestic production of face masks, head covers, surgical scrubs and gowns will commence... I am equally impressed with the invention of a solar-powered hand washing sink and the COVID-19 prevention electronic bucket...

Source: Citineewsroom.com (Paragraph 5, April 5, 2020).

Also, funds allocated for cushioning the citizenry during the pandemic outbreak and readjustment in the budget to cater for all cost as a result of the pandemic resulted in the shortage of estimated gross domestic product (GDP). For example, in a story on *citineewsroom.com* the Minister of Finance stated that,

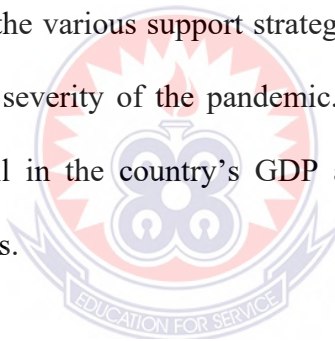
Speaker, the total estimated fiscal impact from the shortfall in petroleum receipts, shortfall import duties, the shortfall in other tax revenues, the costs of the preparedness plan, and the cost of Coronavirus Alleviation Programme is GH9, 505 billion...on the real sector shows that the 2020 projected real GDP growth rate could decline from 8 % to 2.6 % with an outbreak and 1.5 % with a partial lock-down

Source: Citineewsroom.com (paragraph 7 & 8, March 31, 2020).

In line with Oh et al. (2012) who found that if journalistic reporting of the H1N1 pandemic was mainly sourced from the WHO and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, journalists would avoid words that will cause uncertainty and fear. This can be said for journalists in Ghana who relied extensively on the Ghana Health Service and the Ministry of Information. This prevented any theatrical presentation of

COVID-19 and minimised the level of consequences associated with the pandemic. Hence, the reason for minimal fear and uncertainty frame during news coverage. Again, in the course of government introducing stimulus packages aimed at cushioning the county from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, gains were made and this is evident in the extract above on the commencement of domestic production of personal protective equipment.

However, the pandemic brought adverse effect and resulted in a decrease in the country's economic growth. This is supported by the findings made by Ogbodo et al. (2020) that economic consequence had a disadvantage and an advantage. The disadvantage was evident in the drop in US stock due to the coronavirus pandemic and the advantage being the various support strategies that economies instigated as a shock absorber from the severity of the pandemic. In the context of this study, the disadvantage was the fall in the country's GDP and the advantage was the local manufacturing of the PPEs.



4.2.4 Research and Development

Data from table 4 indicated that a total of 167 news stories (7%) had the research and development frame. From this number, 95 (4%) of them were published by citinewsroom.com and 72 news stories (3%) were from peacefmonline.com.

The research and development frame was the fourth and least most appeared frame in the reportage of COVID-19 on the selected online news portals. In line with Hubner (2020), research and development frame was the least identified frame from the findings of this study and this can be attributed to the fact that most scientific researches were still being carried out to understand the virus, its genetic composition,

probable mutations and medications or therapies to manage cases and boost immunity. However, diagnostics, tests, development of tracking apps in Ghana's case and the various ways to boost one's immunity were relayed from time to time. Indicators of the frame include new developments and reassurance.

Data established that the novelty nature of the COVID-19 virus led to the new evidences from time to time. These new evidences meant that the experts and the government made discoveries that led to knowledge advancement which were later communicated to the public concerning the pandemic. These discoveries led to the commencement of some initiatives like mass testing, COVID-19 Tracker App, medications for the management of COVID-19 and test results to determine the nation's future. The Volta Regional Minister, Dr Lesta, on some new developments in the containment of the virus from *citinewsroom.com* is presented below.

We have a very sophisticated laboratory at the University of Health and Allied Sciences. The staffs have gone to Noguchi for training and we are set to start testing. Now you know that apart from cases in Noguchi, we have got two more centres on board but the next phase is to move the testing to the other regions so that they are not localized in Accra and Kumasi

Source: Citinewsroom.com (Paragraph 5, April 13, 2020).

The findings of the study also added that experts together with the government made various attempts to alleviate public fear by reassuring the Ghanaian citizenry from time to time. These assurances and reassurances geared towards the mitigation of public dread about the pandemic by giving a progressive report on the new discoveries or development made concerning the virus. Reassurance messages aimed to give hope to the citizenry and guarantee them of the government's efforts in the containment of the virus. These messages were from government officials, experts

and others. Chairman of the Ghana Medical Association, in a workshop entreated all Ghanaians not to be scared of the pandemic. Hence, *Peacefmonline.com* reported this story on April 9, 2020 as seen in the excerpt below.

We can manage and contain our cases so there is no cause for alarm. What we have to do as Ghanaians is to ensure that we comply with restrictions and adhere to preventive measures

Source: Peacefmonline.com (Paragraph 4, April 9, 2020).

In line with Entman (1993) the news media, namely *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*, selected aspects of COVID-19 and reported these aspects in the identified frames; *disease control frame*, *bare statistics*, *consequence* and *research and development*. The presentations of the selected features of COVID-19 are linked to cognitive nodes which includes values, norms and beliefs and this allows audiences to relate or expected to respond in a more extrapolative way through interpretation (Entman, 1993; Ofori-Birikorang, 2019; Oh et al., 2012). Thus, frames emanate from society and influences how that society accepts information and interpret issues. For this reason, it is logical for every country or state to prepare and put measures in control to fight the spread of diseases hence, the *disease control frame*. These preparations and strategies directed at fighting or containing the virus will need to be enhanced through financial means.

Also, the importation or discovery of a disease is bound to have some reactions from audiences and this may take the form of fear or uncertainty and unprecedented behaviours from citizens as most assert their stance against all government warnings therefore, the inception of the *consequence frame*. As the virus is novel and is one of a kind, researchers and scientists are expected to work tirelessly to identify various measures that can mitigate it completely or better still control the rate of infection and

update the citizenry on the progress and other measures that are being taken hence, the *research and development* frame. That is, in framing news, the media couched and presented the issue based on the belief systems in the country and connected it to the thinking of audiences (Goffman, 1974), as is the case of COVID-19 . As a society, once a disease breaks out measures are instigated right away to contain the spread followed by a constant update on the rate of infection and recoveries. The impact or the consequences of the disease outbreak are assessed and various measures to recuperate are instigated and aided by scientific developments. These frames are in line with the belief systems in society or in coordination with simple elements that can easily be understood by the populace (Goffman, 1974). Also, as complex as the pandemic was, the media's selection by highlighting certain facets served as a shortcut for audiences to relate and make meaning of the pandemic (Shih et al., 2008), as the case of COVID-19.

Journalists play a vital role in framing of news stories by re-covering news stories from different outlooks (D'Angelo, 2018). From the news editors, COVID-19 stories were in some cases re-positioned to give it a different direction from the original story. This reinforces the fact that framing is about selection and salience and that journalistic frames are guided by the news room norms (Ofori-Birikorang, 2019). Findings from this study echoes with the opinions of other studies that media houses employ same themes for stories that are comparable in nature (Shih et al., 2008) This is supported by the news editor for *Peacefmonline.com*:

You know when news of this nature come or in every aspect, normally we frame it to give is a specific dimension and focus (Editor 1)

The news editor of *citinewsroom.com* had a similar opinion:

“Of course, we also deliberately set out to cover ... you see whatever situation you’re covering, you’d want to give it the 360 angle. A lot of times it is not like a full agenda but of course, sometimes along the line, we sit and then we deliberate. Okay, let’s look at this angle and see. So, it’s a deliberate news strategy to always give all the angles within that situation that you’re covering”.

Issue frame was present in the coverage of COVID-19 stories. According to D'Angelo (2018), issue frames are highly dependent on the triumph or fiasco a topic gains during its appraisal. It is evident in this study that the issue or topic of COVID-19 upon evaluation was deemed very necessary and considered a threat. Also, D'Angelo (2018) moves further to say that the authority backing the argument gives the issue a strong media exposure. In the case of COVID-19, the World Health Organisation deemed it as a threat to lives and declared it a pandemic (WHO, 2020). This means that the COVID-19 was no more a national issue but was recognised by a world renowned organisation and this gave COVID-19 more media appearances even in countries that had not yet recorded cases.

Most stories in Ghana were sourced from the government of Ghana and its agencies (Table 3). Others as a source combined all non-governmental and non-expert sources, hence, the reason for it being the first most cited source. However, foreign media/international sources was the next most cited source and this reveals the strength of the issue, that is COVID-19 gaining media attention. The strength of the issue determines the selection and attention the media gives to it D'Angelo (2018). COVID-19 was not a disease the world was familiar with and this called for the concern of both national and international organisations due to its level of spread and fatalities

recorded at the onset of spread. This made COVID-19 a captivating issue due to the threat it posed to humanity globally.

News frames involves the use of multimedia contents to give more weight on the issue or topic (D'Angelo (2018). *Citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com* employed images and videos (audio visuals) in their COVID-19 news reportage (see Table 2). This was to give audiences alternatives in reportage yet sending the same message across. The use of multimedia elements in the coverage of COVID-19 news stories was to give more emphasis to the pandemic as texts alone could not have achieved that. The editor for *citinewsroom.com* stated the reason for incorporating these modalities into the news published on COVID-19,

“...the point is that pictures and videos literarily give you a better imagination and it sticks with you more than just text. Do you get it? And so it is deliberate to keep pictures. It is deliberate to keep videos. When the story is so long sometimes they could even skip the text and start watching the video. Do you get it? You know so those are strategies that we use in terms of online news construction and how it works and plays out”.

4.3 Summary

This chapter presented the findings, discussions and analysis of the study. The chapter answered the first research questions which sought to address the issue of prominence in relation to the number of COVID-19 news stories *Peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com* covered the various sources from which COVID-19 news stories emanate and the enhancement attached to the coverage of COVID-19. The study situated the findings in reviewed literature, the Agenda Setting Theory and the Framing Theory. Findings from this study revealed that the media in its quest to

prioritize issues sets an agenda to influence audiences to think towards the line the media chooses. The study revealed the various frames the media couched COVID-19 news stories from. In relation to the Framing theory, findings from the study reinforced journalistic frames, issue frames and news frames. The study also revealed that salience was given to COVID-19 based on the propinquity factor of the disease to Ghana.



CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This study set out to explore the coverage of COVID-19 on selected online news portals in Ghana. The study came out with several findings and analysis in relation to how the selected online news portals gave salience to COVID-19, the various frames that emerged from the study and the issue of proximity value. The chapter gives a summary of the issues that emerged from the study, draws conclusions and makes recommendations on the subject of media coverage of pandemics, specifically COVID-19. Possible suggestions for further research are also indicated in this section.

5.1 Summary

Research on media and pandemic have focused on how the media reports coverage of pandemics from various dimension including the examination of newspaper coverage given to the 2014 Ebola crisis and its presentation on social media platform, online media surveillance, coverage of meningitis outbreaks in Ghana, coverage of the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic in the Dutch media among others. Though issues about pandemics are of concern to researchers, it was discovered from the literature reviewed that within the Ghanaian context, studies on media reportage of pandemic exists but that of COVID-19 and online news portals seem to be limited. As a result, this research investigated the coverage of COVID-19 on *peacefmonline.com* and *citinewsroom.com*. The following research questions were used to realize the objectives of the study:

1. What is the nature of coverage was given to the issue of COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?

2. What are the frames used in covering news on COVID-19 on *Peacefmonline.com* and *Citinewsroom.com*?

To have a foundation upon which findings from this study were critically analysed, an extensive review of literature was carried out. Literature reviewed was organized under the following: Media and Health Communication and Conceptualization of COVID-19 in the Media. Also, review of relevant literature on the media's reportage of pandemics, the effects of pandemic news reportage on audience, relevant theories and their significance towards the topic of study was carried out.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014) and a qualitative content analysis design (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). Purposive sampling (Etikan et al. 2016) was used to select the online news portals of the radio stations and the participants of the study. Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) and interviews (Creswell, 2014) were the data collection methods employed. Document analysis was used to examine the content news of 3,618 news articles out of which 2,382 were COVID-19 news stories. Employing semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, the researcher engaged 2 participants (editors of the news portals) to find out their perspectives on the phenomenon being studied. Finally, to give a thickly rich description of the data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed. In answering research question one, images *only* and *images and videos* were the enhancements given to COVID-19 news stories by the news portals. Also, seven sources of COVID-19 news stories were revealed; *others, government agencies, foreign media, experts, politicians and pharmaceutical company*. From the thematic analysis of the news articles, four themes were derived to answer research question two. These are *disease control, bare statistics consequence and research and development*. The study adopted McCombs and Shaw's Agenda Setting theory

(McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and the Framing theory (D'Angelo, 2018; Goffman, 1974) to properly contextualize the study

5.2 Main Findings

The following were key findings from the data after analysing the data gathered:

Firstly, the nature of coverage given to COVID-19 by the online news portals as a way of giving prominence to the pandemic was evident in the frequency given to the pandemic, enhancements that accompanied the COVID-19 news stories, sources cited in the news stories and the proximity factor. Thus, the study revealed that the concentration and media attention given to the pandemic was evident in the number of stories published on the online news portals geared towards the awareness creation of COVID-19. That is, out of 3,618 news stories, 2,382 (66%) focused on COVID-19 news reportage and the remaining 1,236 (34%) focused on other stories. Also, findings from the study revealed that enhancements were used with the COVID-19 news stories. These were *images only* (71%) and *images and videos* (29%). It was evident from the data that *citinewsroom.com* gave more *images and videos* (25%) enhancement than *peacefmonline.com* (4%). Also, more COVID-19 news stories on *peacefmonline.com* were in *images only* (49%) than *citinewsroom.com* (22%). Peacefmonline.com gave more enhancements to COVID-19 news stories (53%) than *citinewsroom.com* (47%). Lastly, findings for research question one identified the various sources of the COVID-19 news stories that were reported on the selected online news portals. The study showed that *others* 518 (36.17%) were the most cited source followed by *government Officials/ Agency* 414 (28.9). *Foreign media* 214 (15%) was third followed by *experts* 190 (13.2%); *politicians* 94 (6.6%) and *pharmaceutical company* 2 (0.13%) as the least cited source. *Other* as the most cited

source was attributed to the fact that the disease affected the entire Ghanaian citizenry and that room is given to opinions of the citizenry during the outbreak of crisis. *Government agency* is a vital source that can never be left out during the reportage of a pandemic within a country as it is charged with ensuring the total wellbeing of the citizenry and all issues pertaining to the rollout of strategies to contain and curb the virus spread. *Foreign media/ International source* also played a role in alerting the globe on the discovery of the pandemic, its state of emergency and the possible ways of managing infected cases as spread took place on foreign lands. These strategies of containing the spread from foreign and international sources were adopted locally. *Expert sources* were less and could contribute to the fact that Ghanaian researchers were new to the virus and were still at the virus discovery state, hence, the reason for recording less voice in the coverage of the pandemic locally. Politicians on the other hand also relayed some COVID-19 messages from a political standpoint and as Ghanaian citizens.

Research objective two sought to address how the media framed the COVID-19 pandemic along with some identified issues that influenced reportage. The research identified four frames. Also, dominance of the frame was determined by frequency. The findings revealed these frames in order of dominance: *disease control* 1,358 (57%), *bare statistics* 476 (20%), *consequence* 381 (16%) and *research and development* 167 (7%). Disease control frame was revealed as the most dominant frame. This is because all activities carried out by the government, individuals, organisations and foreign governments were geared towards containing the spread of the virus. The *bare statistics* frame covered all explanations on the country's recorded cases, recoveries and death. This frame was adopted by the media to give updates and to create awareness for citizens to observe instigated control measures of spread and

to give hope to those in fear. The *consequence* frame revealed all the advantageous and disadvantageous impacts COVID-19 has had on the country. The *research and development* frame exposed all assurance and reassurance messages that gave hope to the Ghanaian citizenry with respect to the consistent updates on new evidence or development made in finding ways of managing cases, controlling case spread and test results. The use of these frames suggests that journalists stresses on the essential parts of pandemics in news reportage.

5.3 Conclusion

The following conclusions were drawn from the results of the study.

To begin with, the study concludes that the selected news portal gave the pandemic utmost attention through their reportage. They played the role of an educator by constantly updating the citizenry on the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of sensitising or creating awareness of the disease. The study, therefore, affirms that in Agenda Setting Theory, the mass media sets a precedent that influences audiences on public health issues. Also, the study concludes that the media did not frame the pandemic as alarmist or spackle fear among audiences and this is evident in the frames revealed from the findings of this study. The most dominant being the various measures to contain the virus and minimise spread. Lastly, the study concludes that media coverage of the pandemic was highly based on propinquity factor. Thus, COVID-19 news was more noticeable when neighbouring countries and Ghana begun recording cases of infection.

5.4 Limitation of Study

To begin with, COVID-19 restrictions and its impact expanded the duration for data collection, especially the gathering of interview data. The researcher had to constantly

do lots of follow ups before she could secure interview appointments with the editors of the news portals. Nonetheless, the researcher gathered adequate data from the editors when they finally granted the interviews.

Again, whereas most literature on COVID-19 focused on the origin, mode of transmission, possible vaccine development and other scientific related issues, literature on the media coverage of COVID-19 was scant. Due to its newness in nature, it was difficult getting literature on media coverage of COVID-19 in Ghana and even within the African context. Majority of the reviewed literature were situated within the Western context. This is because generally, there have been minimal studies on media coverage of COVID-19 within the African context and even the global context especially on online news portals. The researcher situated much of the analysis within the framework of literature from the West that mostly focused on pandemics in general. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the scant literature on the media coverage of COVID-19 within the Ghanaian, African and Global context.

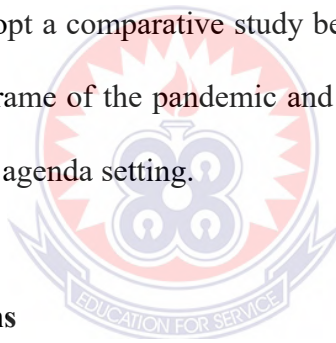
5.5 Suggestions for further studies

Analysis was done in the early stages where Ghana had recorded its first COVID-19 cases and had instituted some precautionary directives to minimise its spread. That is the first forty days of outbreak. Future researchers should widen the scope of the study and focus on how the frames employed by the media evolved over the various phases of news reportage of COVID-19.

Analysis was done on only two online news portals. Future researchers can carry out studies on more than two online news portals for a more robust work and also identification of frames. Also, as the current study concentrated on online news

portals reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic which is a form of new media or digital media, future research studies can look into the coverage given to COVID-19 by the traditional media say the newspapers, television and radio stations and how the pandemic was framed. Similarly, future researchers can expand the scope of the study by comparing media outlets and the various frames employed in their reportage of COVID-19.

Again, future researchers may adopt the audience or public agenda setting approach to study how audiences framed the pandemic in relation to their exposure to mass media content. This will give the audience perspective of how the media framed the pandemic. Or better still, to uncover how audiences framed the pandemic. Similarly, future researchers can adopt a comparative study between the media's framing of the pandemic and audience frame of the pandemic and identify a linkage between media agenda setting and public agenda setting.



5.6 Recommendations

The following recommendation is made based on the research questions and objectives, findings, discussions and conclusions of the research on the coverage of COVID-19 reportage on online news portals.

Findings showed that the portals gave a lot of attention to the pandemic and depended more on credible sources in their reportage. This reduced the panic and fear associated with the outbreak in Ghana and properly educated readers about the pandemic. Hence, this study recommends that Ghanaian media should adopt this pattern of reportage during health crisis to aid with education of the citizenry in such times.

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APPENDIX A

Coding Sheet

CATEGORY	CUMULATIVE		<i>CITINEWSROOM.COM</i>		<i>PEACEFMONLINE.COM</i>	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
NEWS STORY						
ENHANCEMENT						
NEWS SOURCE						
FRAMES						
TOTAL						



APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

Instructions

Please find below the drafted guidelines that directed the interviews conducted with the news editors for *citinewsroom.com* and *Peacefmonline.com*.

1. Since you are in the mainstream, I want to know why the media at large suddenly adopted to show us the negative aspect of COVID-19. For instance, when Ghana was COVID-19 negative, few news articles shown to the audiences were mostly concentrated on the death toll in the western countries without any cases of recoveries or hope from these countries. Why did the media adopt this approach instead of showing us some positives together with the negatives?
2. Majority of your news stories were COVID-19 focused. For instance, March 31, 2022 had a total of 64 news stories with 56 stories concentrating on COVID-19. Why so?
3. Almost all of news articles were attached with images and videos aside the written text. Can you kindly give the underlining reason for choosing to add these visual elements?
4. It's been established by scholars that when two agenda meet, the issue agenda supersedes. However, in the course of COVID-19 news coverage, little of meningitis in the northern belt was projected although the death toll was vastly leading than that of COVID-19. However, media shift from the COVID-19 to meningitis was not seen rather, COVID-19 stayed as the most covered news story. Can you elaborate why and how the COVID-19 agenda was still given the media highlight?

5. Findings from my work revealed themes like Disease Control which included categories like donation, precautionary and health measures and advice; Statistics; Research and Development- reassurance and new development and Consequence-uncertainties, economic (positive and negative) and rule flouters. Can you kindly explain why the stories on COVID-19 were framed this way and the intention behind these frames?
6. Sources of news articles attributes some level of credibility to the news articles to a large extent. As some stories had directly been attributed to some sources, others were not. Why was this so?
7. Also, as expert and governmental sources gives solid foundation to the news articles, individuals living the experiences of the pandemic can act as very credible when it comes to news sourcing and the effect it can have on audiences will be of great weight. It was however noted that less to no article could to trace to the infected persons. Can you help explain this?
8. Over the years, news coverage on pandemics, epidemics and diseases have been highly attributed to the issue of proximity value. In the case of COVID-19 news reportage in Ghana, proximity value played its role. Although there were coverage on the pandemic when the country had recorded no case, reportage suddenly intensified when the country recorded two cases. Why is it so?
9. Much attention was given to COVID-19 when the country recorded her first cases through to the lockdown period as compared to after the lockdown period. How will this be explained and what was the media's rationale for adopting this approach of attention generation?
10. Would you say that the media hyped COVID-19 news coverage? Can you explain your answer?