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MEDIATISATION DYNAMICS AND BROADCAST NEWS SELECTION APPROACHES IN NIGERIA DURING THE COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract

This study examines how the dynamics surrounding mediatisation of COVID-19 narratives significantly impacted broadcast news selection among broadcast media professionals in Nigeria. It conceptually expounds on certain influences that mediatisation dynamics exert on broadcast news stories especially on how they were chosen, framed, and presented to the public. The theoretical foundation of this paper is provided by the Media System Dependency and Mediatisation theories. The study employs Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjaer's (2015) typologies of media dynamics: amplification, framing, performance avenues, and co-structuring to relate how mediatisation influences broadcast news selection. The study revealed that amplification entails the media's power to magnify event, focusing predominantly on the negative aspects of the pandemic, such as death tolls and infection rates, which aligns with the typical newsworthiness criteria favouring the extraordinary and negative. Conversely, framing and performance avenues align with the broadcast media's ability to shape how the pandemic was perceived by selecting terminology and emphasising specific issues. This includes sensitising the public on preventive measures and providing a platform for various stakeholders to communicate their actions. Co-structuring explores how the broadcast media, often controlled by the elite, influence the public agenda and prompt actions from

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authorities. The paper concludes that broadcast media not only influence society but are also influenced by the concept of mediatisation, acknowledging the vital role they play in providing information for societal well-being.

Keywords: Mediatisation; Dynamics; News; News selection; COVID-19; Approaches; Broadcast

Introduction

A central presupposition, relating to questions of both the society and of culture, is that the media institution is essentially concerned with the production and distribution of knowledge. The knowledge produced and made available by the media institution enables people in society to make some sense of their experience of the social world, even though the taking of meaning occurs in relatively autonomous and varied ways. The information, images, and ideas made available by the media may, for most people, be the main source of an awareness of a shared past (history) and of a present social location.

The media are also a store of memories, and a map of where and who we are, and may also provide the materials for orientation to the future. As noted at the outset, the media, to a large extent, serve to constitute our perceptions and definitions of social reality and normality for the purposes of public and shared social life, and are a key source of standards, morals, and norms. Suffice it to say that media contents is explicitly shaped by cultural values, norms and societal perspectives. This may include deliberate and conscious effort of the media to promote cultural identity or belief system. Conversely, media content can also be influenced by cultural and societal elements unconsciously. In other words, the cultural backgrounds and belief system of a journalists has the potency to affects the content of media messages. For instance, the way news stories are covered, processed and disseminated can be influenced by cultural and societal biases. The above, validates Obong's (2019) assertion of media contents being culturally-laden whether implicitly or explicitly.

Though the media contribute to socio-cultural knowledge formation in the society, the main emphasis here is the degree to which the different media institutions have competitively interposed their functions by fiercely attempting to disrupt our personal experience of the world beyond our immediate personal environment and our direct

sensory observation. On a subliminal level, they tend to extend their influences by providing us with main point of contact with institutions in the society in which we live in. In matters concerning values and ideas in a secular society, the mass media tend to take over from the early influences of school, parents, religion, siblings, and companions. We are consequently very dependent on the media for a large part of our wider symbolic environment – the pictures in our heads are, in most cases, formed and sharpened by the media no matter how much we tend to shape our own personal version. It is the media which are likely to forge the elements which are held in common with others, since we now tend to share much the same media sources and media culture.

Mediatisation of COVID-19 narratives significantly impacted broadcast news selection processes among media professionals in Nigeria. It has introduced a set of dynamics that influence how news stories are chosen, framed, and presented to the public. First and foremost, the 24/7 news cycle, driven by the mediatisation process, has accelerated the pace of news selection. With the demand for real-time information, broadcast media outlets have had to prioritise stories related to COVID-19. This often means that news selection is heavily influenced by the urgency of the situation, with the latest developments taking precedence.

The integration of social media into the news selection process has been a pivotal aspect of mediatisation. News outlets frequently monitor social media platforms for emerging stories and public sentiments. This real-time engagement with social media has made audience feedback and trending topics a central consideration in news selection (Obong & Banigo, 2023). As a result, stories that gain traction on social media platforms often find their way into the news agenda. Citizen journalism, which has gained prominence due to mediatisation, plays a role in news selection. Ordinary Nigerians using smartphones have become sources of news stories (Obong & Banigo, 2023). Broadcast media outlets also incorporate user-generated content into their reporting, but the challenge lies in verifying and fact-checking such content to ensure accuracy. This paper is an attempt to highlight the relationship between the dynamics of mediatisation and how it influences broadcast news selection in Nigeria, specifically in the wake of the Coronavirus disease, code-named 'COVID-19.'

Theoretical Foothold

This paper is premised on two theories: the Media System Dependency Theory and Mediatisation Theory. Propounded by Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach in 1975, **Media System Dependency Theory** asserts that the degree of audience's dependence on media and their contents is the key variable in understanding when and why media messages alter audience's beliefs, feelings or behaviour (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975 cited in Baran, 2004). Another major proposition of the theory is that in the modern society, the audience are increasingly dependent on the media to understand the social world and to act meaningfully and effectively in society (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975 cited in Baran, 2004).

The theory suggests that the audience parasitically leverage on media contents for virtually every aspects and spheres of their existence. Such parasitic exploitation of media contents is orchestrated by the audience's over-dependence and heavy reliance on the media to solve or address personalised issues. Though the theory is a middle-range theory, it specifies the assertive influence the broadcast media exert on the daily existence of individuals in society. The theory portends that the audience excessively utilise the media for varied specialised purposes that the audience become overtly addicted to media contents that cutting off from the media's daily supplies becomes so difficult. The theory argues that in our complex and changing society, people become increasingly dependent on media and their contents to understand what is going on around them and to learn how to behave meaningfully (Baran, 2004).

From a macroscopic societal perspective, if more and more people become dependent on media, media institutions will be reshaped to serve these dependencies, the overall influence of media will rise, and media's role in society will become more central. Thus there should be a direct relationship between the amount of overall dependency and the degree of media influence or centrality at any given point in time.

DeFleur and Ball-Rockeach (1975) cited in Baran and Davis (2010, p. 288-289) have provided a fuller explanation of the theory in several assertions as follows.

a. First, the "basis of media influence lies in the relationship between the larger social system, the media's role in that system, and audience relationships to the media." Effects occur not because all-powerful media or omnipotent media sources compel that occurrence, but because the media operate in a given way, in a given social

system, to meet given audience wants and needs. This could be what Udoakah (2017) had in mind when he asserts that beyond being impossible, it is unthinkable to isolate the way media products are packaged from the political, cultural, and other social dynamics which make their conception and production possible. This is the justification for the reason it would be difficult for the standard of journalism practice in Nigeria to be higher than the country's values and morality index (Udoakah, 2017). The essence is that even the so-called journalists and media professionals hardly isolate themselves from their social, cultural, political, religious, and ethnocentric entwinements in their discharge of 'professional services' (Obong & Ukpabio, 2023; Ukpabio & Obong; 2023).

b. Second, "the degree of audience dependence on media information is the key variable in understanding when and why media messages alter audience beliefs, feelings, or behaviour" (Baran & Davis, 2010, p. 288-289). The ultimate occurrence and shape of media effects rests with the audience members and is related to how necessary a given medium or message is to them. The uses people make of media determine media's influence. If we rely on many sources other than media for our information about events, then the role of media is less than if we rely exclusively on a few media sources.
c. Third, "in our industrial society, we are becoming increasingly dependent on the media (a) to understand the social world, (b) to act meaningfully and effectively in society, and (c) for fantasy and escape" (Baran & Davis, 2010, p. 288-289). As our world becomes more complex and as it changes more rapidly, we not only need the media, to a greater degree to help us make sense, to help us understand what our best responses might be, and to help us relax and cope; but we also ultimately come to know that world largely through those media. Friends and family may not know much about what is going on in the larger social world except what they learn from media. As we use media to make sense of the social world, we permit media to shape our expectations.
d. Fourth, the greater the need – and consequently the stronger the dependency on the media – the greater the likelihood that the media and their messages will have an effect. Not everyone will be equally influenced by media. Those who have greater needs and thus greater dependency on media will be most influenced.

Meanwhile, the knowledge that members of the society depend on the media to understand the world, and to act meaningfully and effectively in that world, propels broadcast media professionals in Nigeria to select certain aspects of occurrences in the society to report. For instance, in the context of COVID-19 outbreak, which is the focus of this paper, broadcast media professional in Nigeria, knowing that majority of the members of the Nigerian public depend on their reports in order to understand the goings on about the disease, and how to act meaningfully and effectively to avoid infection, had taken it upon themselves to inform their audiences as elaborately as possible. Therefore, the Media System Dependency Theory is applicable to this paper.

The applicability of the tenets of the theory to this paper is established by the following inquisitive puzzles: think of where you get the information pertaining to the outbreak of COVID-19 in faraway China from. Also, you should think of where you turned to on a daily basis to get the latest updates on the developments, issues, and trends about COVID-19. Equally, worth thinking about is where you turned to in sourcing for COVID-19 preventive health-related messages on how to prevent being infected by the virus. If after all the think-through sessions, the broadcast media are not enlisted as one of the destination points, then the Media System Dependency Theory has lost its appeal and applicability to this research and on the strength of this, its tenets should be debunked, refuted or rendered baseless.

If not everywhere in the world, in Nigeria, the broadcast media were and are still being depended upon to understand what is going on around us, what is happening in other climes, to know how to behave and to learn what to do (how to practice the health tips specified in the health messages) in containing the dreaded pandemic-COVID-19. Dependency Theory vividly explains our heavy broadcast media use and reinforces the notion of the impact that professionals who operate/exploit the broadcast media in disseminating messages to us, are selective of the frame of reference they adopt in influencing our behaviour in the process.

Since mediatisation is still a relatively new contribution to the vocabulary of media and communication research, its exact meaning remains contested (Lundby, 2009). However, Schrott (2009) notes that while the media formerly operated in the service of other institutions (for instance, as conveyors of messages from the political or religious institutions), they now primarily serve themselves. As the media have gained institutional

autonomy and have simultaneously come to play a central role in a modern society in which media presence is crucial for social actors, other institutions of society have begun accommodating the logic of the media. By doing so, they become mediatised. These are the premises upon which **Mediatisation Theory** is founded.

The core of mediatisation consists in the mechanism of the institutionalisation of media logic in other sub-systems of the society (Schrott, 2009). Hjarvard (2008) states that mediatisation is the process whereby the society, to an increasing degree, is submitted to, or becomes dependent on the media and their logic. Society, in this context refers to both the mediatised society and its various institutions and the activities within them.

Hjarvard (2004) identifies a distinction between weak and strong mediatisation. By strong mediatisation, he refers to the processes by which activities that were previously not dependent on media assume mediated form. Weak mediatisation, on the other hand, relates to processes by which activities are merely increasingly influenced by media logic. What is meant by media logic, in the context of this discourse, refers to how media systems work, and also the forms and formats they indirectly favour and sustain. Media logic is the institutional, technological, and expressive characteristics of media (Hjarvard, 2008). On a constant basis, this logic is what broadcast professionals, through their deliberate or intentional servicing of the society or culture, promote as social reality.

However, Couldry (2008) notes that the various media are not necessarily characterised by the same things; and that there will sometimes be differences between the institutional, technological, and expressive (i.e. aesthetic or rhetorical) modes of operation of different media. He further notes that the logics that guide the workings of a Hollywood movie, for instance, are quite different from those guiding the operation of newspapers. Mediatisation is thus constituted in the mutually influencing and moulding relationship between broadcast media institutions and the actors that reproduce, maintain, and develop them through their agency.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Mediatisation

Mediatisation was first applied to media's impact on political communication and other effects on politics. Swedish media researcher Kent Asp was the first to speak of the mediatisation of political life. According to him, mediatisation is a process whereby a political system, to a great extent, is influenced by and adjusted to the demands of the mass

media in their coverage of politics (Asp, 1986). One way in which this adaptation occurs is when politicians phrase their public statements in terms that personalise and polarise the issues so that the messages will have a better chance of gaining media coverage.

The contemporary society is permeated by the media, to an extent that the media may no longer be conceived of as being separate from cultural and other social institutions. To this reality, Obong (2019) has accused the media of having a symbiotic relationship and romance with society vice versa. Under these circumstances, it is the place of media researchers to try to gain an understanding of the ways in which social institutions and cultural processes have changed character, function, and structure in response to the over-enduring influence and omnipresence nature of the media in society.

This altered understanding of media importance to the society does not mean that traditional questions regarding aspects like the effects of media messages on public opinion or the purposes to which people use media, are no longer relevant. What it means is that an understanding of the importance of the media in modern society and culture can no longer rely on models that conceive of the media as being separate from the society and culture. A symbiosis in influence, responsibility, and function exist between the media and society (Obong, 2019).

In this notion is the idea that the media are not just technologies that organisations, institutions or individuals can choose to use – or not to use – as they see fit. A significant share of the influence the media exert in the society arises from the fact that they have become an integral part of other institutions' operations. They have also achieved a degree of self-determination and authority that forces other institutions to act in ways they ordinarily would not have liked to act. The media constitute part of the society's fabric and culture, and are independent institutions which stand between other cultural and social institutions, and coordinate their mutual interaction (Obong & Ukpabio, 2023). The dual nature of this structural and symbiotic relationship sets a number of preconditions for how media messages in given situations are used and perceived by senders and receivers, thereby affecting relationships between people (Obong, 2019). Thus, the questions about media use and effects need to take account of the circumstance that society and culture have become mediatised.

The concept of mediatisation emphasises a process of social change in which the mass media have become deeply integrated into different levels of the society. Stromback

and Esser (2014) define mediatisation as a long-term process through which the importance of the media in the society, and their spill-over effects has increased. Not only have the media become more institutionalised, but institutional characteristics of news media, which include standards of newsworthiness, have also changed.

Under the conditions of mediatisation, certain issues such as a focus on negativity, conflicts, and human-interest stories have become more prominent in media coverage (D'Angelo & Esser, 2014). The increased prominence of these issues and the tendency to select negative information in journalistic selection processes advocates an increased misrepresentation or exaggeration of negative incidents compared to reality. Mediatisation can therefore, potentially serve as an overarching theoretical framework to understand the change in the coverage of negative incidents over-time.

Mediatisation is seen as a concept that is most central to an understanding of the importance of media to culture and society. The term has been used in numerous contexts to describe the level of influence that the media exert on a variety of phenomena, but little work has been done to define or specify the concept itself. Only very recently have media researchers sought to develop the concept toward a more coherent and precise understanding of mediatisation as a social and cultural process (Hjarvard, 2008).

Asp (1986) sees media's growing independence of political sources as yet another sign of mediatisation in the sense that the media gain even more control over the content they offer to their audiences. The media have a fundamental impact on all social institutions as well as on their relationships with one another. Hernes (2010) had earlier made allusion to the concept of mediatisation. Though he did not actually use the term 'mediatisation,' but his concept of 'media-twisted society' and the holistic perspective on society he applies is in philosophically consonant, in many ways, with the conception of mediatisation. According to Hernes (2010, p. 181), the philosophy behind mediatisation seeks to provide answers to these pertinent questions:

> What consequences (do) the media have for institutions as well as for individuals: the ways public administration, organizations, parties, schools and businesses function; and how (do) they relate to one another? In what ways do media redistribute power in the society? In short, from an institutional point of view, the key question is: how do the media change both the inner workings of other social entities and their mutual relationships?

Answering these questions is what mediatisation is all about. Generally speaking, mediatisation as a concept denotes the "long-term interrelation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other" (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2010, p. 223).

The Dynamics of Mediatisation and Traditional Broadcast News Selection Principles

Traditionally, broadcast media professionals are guided by certain principles in selecting the items or occurrences in the society that they see fit as news. This is what is known as news determinants. A determinant is a factor that sets the character of something, and in this case, news. The determinants of news are as follow, and include the following: timeliness, proximity/geographic location, prominence/personality involved, consequence or impact, significance, human interest, novelty, conflict, necessity, etc. It is pertinent to briefly expatiate on these points thus

a. **Timeliness:** Today's news will always be stale news tomorrow. Therefore, to attain to broadcast audience's interest or appeal, facts in the report must be fresh, latest, and invokes the sense of 'now'. Conveying the feeling that what is reported is happening at the moment the viewers/listeners are being audio-visually transported to the scene of the event qualify calling the broadcast media, 'the now media.' A term borrowed from Straubhaar, LaRose, and Davenport (2014). Therefore, given the unique nature of the broadcast media, the best time to tell an important story is as soon as it happens or as soon as possible. This explains the rationale behind broadcast media professionals in Nigeria doing their best to inform their audiences of the latest news concerning the COVID-19 pandemic by reporting up-to-minute index cases and latest developments shrouding the pandemic. And they do that as soon as fresh facts emerge. Such facts could be the daily update of infections by the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC); the Ministry of Health; the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (as it then was); or the World Health Organisation (WHO).
b. **Proximity:** The distance between the news item's place of origination and its place of reception by the audience determines its degree of audience-appeal, and the limits of audience-interest. Usually, the nearer an individual is to the location of a news event, the more relevant such an event becomes for him/her. When the COVID-19

outbreak occurred in "far- away" China, broadcast media professionals in Nigeria treat the panic superficially as if to say 'it's their thing and it doesn't concern us.' The issues were not reported by most broadcast stations because its impact was not felt. The broadcast professionals may have had the option of not reporting it due to the distance of occurrence. But when the pandemic hit within the shores of Nigeria and leading to forced lockdown, restriction of movement, and curfew, it was the staple of every broadcast station from morning till night. The excessive attention paid to the disease when index cases were established in the country forced the broadcast media professionals to give it more attention that it once deserve when it was considered to be happening out the country's border. It was the major topic for news, documentaries, talk shows, panel discussions, travelogues, etc.

c. **Prominence/personality involved:** All men may be created equal, but some are more equal and more newsworthy than others. In fact, "big names make news" goes a cliché. However, names do not always make news. Still, happenings that involve well-known, renown, popular, and powerful people or institutions are likely to be interesting even if not very important. For example, the death of Former Chief of Staff to President Buhari, Abba Kyari, from COVID 19, made headline news all over the country, due to the personality involved. This reality was in sharp contrast to a lot of people who were casualties of the virus but whose name were not mediatised.
d. **Consequence/impact/significance/magnitude:** The number people an event or idea affects and the magnitude of seriousness or severity of such event affects audience in determine its importance as news, as well as the extent to which the information may be useful. Again, an item or event may give rise to thought not because of itself but because of its probable consequences – its significance. In this case, broadcast media professionals in Nigeria, knowing how important their reports mean to the wellbeing of the country's citizens, took it upon themselves to report on the dreaded disease, and the consequences of not adhering to the safety and precautionary guidelines. They enforce their messages by informing the masses of the number of index cases recorded each. The alarming number of casualties reported make the topic very serious and supposedly create a lot of impact in compliance with the ideal of the precautionary guidelines to adopt/adapt so as to stay safe.

e. **Human Interest:** Interest in human beings and events because they concern men and women in situations that might confront anyone else, is called human interest. In a general way, human-interest stories might be defined as those stories that arouse emotional sentiments in the media audience and evoke emotional response. The fact that so many people died as a result of the COVID-19 disease was a-good-enough reason for broadcast media professionals in Nigeria to take it upon themselves to report on the disease as a means of appealing to the emotions of their audiences to avoid risky health behaviours or actions.

f. **Novelty:** This news determinant has to do with the unusual, or bizarre. Though there have been one form of epidemic or the other, the COVID-19 disease came as an unusual disease and took the whole world by surprise. It was very common to hear words like "new strand of virus," "novel disease" or new wave of the disease on the broadcast media. This may have constituted the rationale behind the selection of the pandemic as news items by broadcast media professionals in Nigeria.

g. **Conflict:** Conflict is a central determinant of news. Sometimes it is physical, as in wars or in sports. Sometimes it is more subtle and sophisticated like political conflicts. But in the case of COVID-19 news selection, there were series of conflicts associated with the disease. For instance, conflict was reported between the Akwa Ibom State Government and the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) the day the first incidence of the disease arrived the State. There was also conflict when the then State Epidemiologist, Dr. Aniekeme Uwah, was replaced due to disagreement between himself and the then Commissioner for Health in the State, Dr. Dominic Ukpong.

On the whole, broadcast media professionals in Nigeria select news items for their different media houses and platforms using certain considerations. Some of the conditions to consider are those highlighted above, while others could be for pecuniary purpose. Little wonder Udoakah (2017, p.54) notes that:

> Journalism in Nigeria is no longer what it used to be. The journalists in league with their employers have made journalism a form of theatre, played out for the benefit of the highest bidders. Since the advent of news commercialization, money, more than newsworthiness or public interest, has remained the principal factor in media access and news selection in Nigeria.

The above implies that aside the conventional news determinant, there are extant factors that influence the process of selecting news items within the Nigeria media landscape. These factor may be given different nomenclatures such as news commercialisation, brown envelope syndrome, editorial policies amongst others. However, the generic nomenclature that host for all these factors is the "political economy" of the mass media. According to Ismail, Pali and Shem (2020) the economic reality in Nigeria serves as catalyst that encouraged news commercialisation thereby making its practice ubiquitous in most media outfits in Nigeria. Ismail, Pali and Shem (2020) further revealed that the above scenario automatically makes "money" a news determinant whereby the amount of money received from a news source determines and to a great significance, influences the newsworthiness of a story. From the foregoing, it is evident to note that there were stories that were given attention during the outbreak of COVID-19 not because these stories met any of the conventional news values but perhaps because of the "cash" given to journalists to cover such stories.

Broadcast Mediatisation and News Selection/Amplification Approaches in Nigeria

Interestingly, the broadcast media are seen to play certain roles in the society. These roles may influence news selection by broadcast media professionals. These approaches which are projected as metaphors are as follows:

a. **Window between social events and human experience**s: The broadcast media, as McQuail (2010) notes, are the 'windows on the world' opening the society to eventualities in real time. The windowing approach the broadcast media bring to the treatment and portrayal of social events extends our vision, enabling us to see for ourselves what is going on, without interference from others. Broadcast media professionals in Nigeria performed this role by transposing us to the epicentres, red zones, scenes, and forefront of the dreaded disease while we are yet in our comfort zones. Thus, displaying to us the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic around the world.
b. **Mirroring social events and the world:** This implies a faithful reflection, although the angle and direction of the mirror are decided by others, and we are less free to see what we want. This seems to be what Udoakah (2017, p.28) meant when he notes that:

> Transmutation of occurrence begins with the reporter. Reporters, like other sets of journalists, come from different socio-economic, religious, cultural and educational backgrounds. These backgrounds affect the way they select and organize the facts of the occurrence which they cover. As you probably know, every occurrence is a result of a process and it is made up of facts which had accumulated in a somewhat systematic fashion. But rarely has it been reported in its 'raw' form.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, majority of the people in the world saw the reflection of the disease as projected by the broadcast media, whether in the 'transmuted' or 'raw' form.

c. **Filtering, and gatekeeping between social events and audience:** Acting to select parts of experience for special attention and closing off other views and voices, whether deliberately or not. Even though the broadcast media try as much as they want to mirror the society, they cannot tell the 'complete' story as there are certain aspects of the story they cannot tell, they may either do that on purpose or circumstances may warrant them to do that. It is worthy to note here that no mention is made in the Nigerian broadcast media of any poor person who may have been infected by the COVID-19 disease so far. This may be influenced by the prominence element of news determinant, as noted earlier, or deliberately done for certain purpose unknown.

d. **Signposting, guiding or interpreting social reality for audience:** This implies pointing the way and making sense of what is otherwise puzzling or fragmentary. The broadcast media perform this role by answering the questions in the minds of their audiences concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions pertaining to the cause(s) of the disease, symptoms, incubation period before death occurs, morbidity, and mortality rates, and most importantly, possibility of containment or cure.

e. **Forum for information and public discourse:** The broadcast media, in mediatizing COVID-19, provided stakeholders with forum or platform for the presentation of information and ideas related to the disease to an audience, often with possibilities for response and feedback. It is through the broadcast media that

a lot of people give voice to their curiosity and worries, and make contributions about the disease.

f. **Disseminator** who passes on and makes information available to all who have access.

g. **Interlocutor** or informed partner in conversation who responds to questions in a quasi-interactive way. The media perform this role about the disease through panel discussion forums.

The Dynamics of Broadcast Mediatisation of COVID-19 Outbreak in Nigeria

In the following section, this paper will use mediatisation theory as a point of departure from which to understand the influence of various media dynamics in social and cultural context involved in the coverage of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Using the word 'influence' in relation to the media is explicitly avoiding the use of 'media effects', which would suggest the idea that the media, at the level of individual messages, may have a definitive influence on audience members' opinion and behaviour. This may be the case under specific circumstances, but this is not the point of interest here. The perspective of this paper is not primarily a question of news dissemination, but rather on how the media environment conditions the selection and representations of the stories on Coronavirus disease by broadcast media professionals in Nigeria, in their reportage of the disease.

From the perspective of mediatisation theory, the question about the influence of broadcast media on social interaction may more aptly be described as the ways in which the integration and presence of the broadcast media in social and cultural domains come to condition, but not determine, the encounters between actors in everyday life. The broadcast media have been institutionalised in different contexts as resources for social interactions.

From the point of view of the individual actor, whether as an individual or an organisation, the broadcast media are the available tools that enable, limit, and structure communicative interaction in various ways. These conditions will certainly vary according to the broadcast media and social context in question, but at a more general level, this paper will suggest in the following section that these conditions insert certain dynamics into the way in which social interaction come to be spelt out, and in the case under

consideration, in relation to selection and presentation of the COVID 19 pandemic by broadcast media professionals in Nigeria.

Conceptually speaking, these dynamics are positioned at the intersection between mediatisation and mediation processes. The dynamics are a result of the mediatised conditions, the institutional interdependencies between the broadcast media and the society, which specifically concern the way in which actual communicative interactions are performed and come to have a bearing on the social life of the society.

This paper therefore adopts the three typology of media dynamics advanced by Hjarvard, Mortensen and Eskjaer (2015), as i.) amplification; ii.) framing and performance avenues; and iii.) co-structuring. In order to further specify these three media dynamics, the researchers use the Coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19) as an illustrative example, since this major and tragic event encompassed all of these dynamics and may be more familiar to international readers than any national event one can think of. The dynamics are expatiated thus:

a. **Amplification:** Looking at the broadcast media as conduits or channels of mass communication, one would observe an important dynamic of the media's ability to amplify, not only communication, but also the ramifications of the reported events. As such, it concerns the volume, speed, and reach of communication and the subsequent level of involvement by people. The broadcast media help to amplify the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic by telling their audience members the impact of the disease in the country. The broadcast media also debate on the consequences of the pandemic to the different sectors of the society. For instance, the consequences of the disease on the economic sector in the society were and are still being discussed on the broadcast media, and people are advised to take precautionary measures to be able to cope with the catastrophic effects of the disease, now and in the future.

   It is interesting to note that the broadcast media amplified the negative side of the pandemic more than they do about the positive aspects of the disease. They bombard their audiences with the number of deaths, the number of infection, the number of people in quarantine, etc., while not much emphasis is given to the number of those who fully recover from the disease.

   Traditionally, news is defined in terms of extra-ordinariness and exceptionality. Following this notion, broadcast media professionals usually tend to portray infrequent

and isolated incidence in the society, rather than simply mirroring reality. This event-driven broadcast media coverage does not accurately reflect the underlying complex realities of day-to-day events and long-term socio-economic trends. This leads to a distortion or bias in favour of the negative.

Furthermore, in their skewed and event-driven coverage, broadcast media professionals therefore amplify negative news over the positive. One of the explanations as to why media professionals tend to favour the selection of negative news over the positive could be inherent in the nature of newsworthiness, which makes reference to something negative. Negative news is generally seen to be unambiguous, consensual, unexpected, and seem to occur over a shorter period of time, compared to the positive news which usually takes a longer period to develop.

It is therefore safe to postulate here that the selection and amplification of the negative aspects of COVID-19 stories by broadcast media professionals in Nigeria is a result of their attempt to attract the attention of the public to these stories. After all, bad news is good news as far as news selection and commercialisation of the media is concerned (Aday, 2010).

b. **Framing and Performance Avenue:** The second media dynamic reflects the fact that the broadcast media are not neutral vehicles of information exchange, but they bring to bear particular constructions of the message in terms of meaning and aesthetics. In a metaphorical and philosophical sense, the broadcast media are also languages through which the world is represented, framed in particular ways, as well as bestow the communication of events with a certain narrative and dramaturgy. The broadcast media also serve as arenas where the various involved actors perform.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, broadcast media professionals in Nigerian frame the stories in ways that suggest particular interpretations. For instance, by choosing the word "pandemic" the broadcast media have already suggested to their audience members the level of severity of the outbreak. Hence, "by repeating, framing, and priming [COVID-19] issues, the [broadcast] media attach or confer significant reference, relevance, significance, attention, and popularity to [the] issues in a manner that make such issues appear as the most important issues on the 'dissemination', 'discussion' and 'treatment' agenda of the [broadcast] media" (Obong & Targema, 2023, p.12). Entman (1993) cited in Sam (2019) states that framing entails the selection of certain aspects of a perceived reality

and the salience these aspects are given. Through these acts of selection and salience-giving, broadcast media professionals in Nigeria promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation over those of other diseases. This is a deviation from agenda setting to a trend Obong and Targema (2023) refer to as agenda framing.

Following the above-stated point of view, there is no gainsaying that broadcast media professionals in Nigeria are the ones selecting the possible avenues to the containment of the disease in their reportage of the pandemic. For instance, it is observed that broadcast media professionals in Nigeria, through their reportage, have been sensitising the public on self-isolation in the event of manifesting any symptom of the disease; keeping the recommended social distance of five metres; frequent hand washing with soap and running water; and use of hand sanitisers, etc. This is what agenda framing is all about.

It should also be stated that the broadcast media provide avenues through which other actors, who are involved in the fight against the disease, air their views. For instance, it is through the broadcast media that health professionals, social workers, and even donor agencies tell the public the efforts so far taken in the fight against the disease. The Government – both at the State and Federal levels in Nigeria – also use the broadcast media to inform the public on the actions taken in the fight against the disease. This is what mediatisation is all about.

c. **Co-Structuring:** Finally, looking at the broadcast media as social and communicative environments, one can discern various ways in which the broadcast media come to co-structure communication and actions in the society. As we have earlier noted, the broadcast media can be seen as avenues for interaction, but these interactive avenues are not evenly distributed. They are embedded within power relationships. The ability to influence the agenda of news media, depends on the prominence of the news source, and, as many studies have demonstrated, political elites and other power holders in society typically have much easier access to the news media, when compared to other sources. These power relationships are conceptualised in the elite-driven media theory (Hallin, 1994).

Even when the media are typically prefixed with the word "mass" the masses do not, most of the time have access to the broadcast media. It is the power brokers and the political class that have access to the broadcast media as sources of information. Except for

the social media, where anyone with Internet-enabled gadgets, can serve both as a source of information and as a receiver, the mainstream broadcast media are controlled by the elite in the society.

In the process of news selection, broadcast media professionals in Nigeria are influenced by the elite-driven media theory where prominent members of the society are considered as worthy news sources. This makes them (the media professionals) to always refer prominence of sources in their news selection processes. They do this, having as a guiding principle, the concept of mediatisation, where they consider their offering through the broadcast media as playing a very important role in the society.

Interestingly, the level of importance of the broadcast media in the society forces actors in other sectors of the society to act in the way they ordinarily would not have acted, if the broadcast media were not that important. For instance, it was the broadcast media which kept hammering that the President of the country should address the country on the level of the nation's preparedness to combat the pandemic. This pressure by the broadcast media compelled President Muhammadu Buhari (former president of Nigeria) to make a national broadcast to the nation.

The same scenario could also be said of the situation in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, where the State Governor, Udom Emmanuel, made a state-wide broadcast, urging the people to go about their normal duties; that the State Government was on top-of-the-situation; even when nothing was put in place to prevent the citizenry from the disease. As at when the Governor made the broadcast, hand sanitisers were not provided at many healthcare facilities in the state, let alone other public places. But the Governor said the Government was "on top of the situation." It is the believed that the Governor was just making the broadcast to look good in the face of the media. This is an aspect of mediatisation.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is obvious that the broadcast media do exert a certain amount of influence on the larger society as a result of their selection of news. However, it is safe to say that the broadcast media professionals themselves are influenced by the notion of mediatisation, whether they know it or not. This statement is borne out of the conviction that the idea of knowing that what they put out, in terms of news, to members

of the public will help them to cope with the effects of the COVID 19 is enough motivation to go out and source for information to give out to the public. This is because the broadcast media professionals know that such information is important to the survival of the society.

Furthermore, it is obvious that media logic influence the way other sectors of the Nigerian society carry their functions, and the way political actors behave. An example of such influence was the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, having to address the press because he wanted to impress them, even when he did not have enough information about the disease as at then. The same scenario played out in Akwa Ibom State when the State Governor, Mr. Udom Emmanuel had to make a state-wide broadcast telling the people to go about their normal business, that the state is on top of the situation, even when there was no preparation whatsoever. Just because he wanted to make the press to be happy. However, though broadcast media professionals are influenced by mediatisation in selecting news, other factors such as the traditional news determinant may have informed their news selection decision.

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