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Making health news: Examining how health influencers drive coverage of maternal and child healthcare issues in Nigerian newspapers

Abstract

Nigeria is a developing country with varied developmental challenges. It has one of the worst maternal and child healthcare (MCH) indices, globally. The media, as a vital element within the society, has the potential to contribute to improving MCH through appropriate framing and communication of MCH issues. Achieving media inclusion poses a challenge as media contents are often products of varied power relations. Extant studies have established that health is often not primed in Nigerian newspapers where politics and business hold sway. News media contents are also influenced by varied factors which exists both within and outside of news media organisations. Premised on sociology of news as critical perspective, this study examines power relations in newspaper representation of MCH issues in Nigeria. Combining content analysis of MCH-related stories in newspapers with in-depth interview of newspaper health editors, it explores factors and underlying reasons driving coverage of MCH. It finds that government, local and international aid agencies, and civil societies often influence coverage of MCH issues. These groups drive media representation of MCH through established journalistic routine and reporter-source relations, often favouring priming of official news sources and 'powerful' elements within the society, as a necessity for maximising limited news media resources. This paper identifies various forms in which these groups manipulates media representation of MCH, urging the media to be more proactive in driving agenda for improved MCH for the citizenry, and not accede to satisfying peculiar interests over public interest.

Keywords

Health Journalism, News Sociology, Maternal Health, Child Health, Nigeria, Media influencers.

1. Introduction

How do journalists make their decisions on what to report? How are selected issues eventually reported? Media reports are not just reporting accidental occurrences. Often, there are predetermined factors that influence the inclusion of occurrences in media space. As noted by Scheufele (1999), journalists tend to be influenced by their attitudes, experiences, ideology,

professional and social norms in making decisions on whether to report an event/occurrence or not; and what aspect of the story to emphasise. Organisational routines also influence media contents leading editorial staff of media organisations to frame issues to conform to the organisation's ideology and perhaps economic interest, a necessary factor for the survival of media establishments. Journalists also rely on external sources which tend to influence their coverage of issues. Due to the demands of the job, journalists habitually rely on established news sources such as political actors, authorities, interest groups, advertisers, etc. for news information, thereby adopting the issue framing directly as presented by these sources (Fishman, 1980). Advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT) has also led to the emergence of new practices and actors influencing news production process beyond the traditional news production practices and norms (Gagnon, 2019). The process of determining what, and how to report, is called frame building, which Scheufele (1999) describes as how media frames are formed. It underscores the notion of Sociology of News, a critical perspective to news media coverage of issues, which serves as supporting framework for this study.

2. Sociology of news

A barrage of events occurs daily. Determining what to report in the news media from the deluge of daily occurrences can be challenging; requiring the consideration of a number of factors by those in charge of the news production process. Studying the factors influencing the selection of news has been an area of scientific enquiry of interest to scholars over the years. Such studies range from work routines, interactions and relationships among news workers, institutions, professional norms and values, to more recent studies on ICT and their actors (Gagnon, 2019; Mathews, 2017). Berkowitz (1997, p. xii) sums up this area of research interest as examining the

[...] social process by which journalists decide what is news and the social forces that influence or limit how journalists gather and assemble news from raw materials into a journalistic product... News becomes the product of the practicalities and constraints of the process by which it is created. It becomes the product of economic systems and political systems, and the press systems that result from them. And it becomes the product of unspoken cultural values and the beliefs by which people manage their daily lives.

Scholars have explored the diverse forces that shape media contents to understand how media contents are selected and framed. For example, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) organise forces that shape media contents into five hierarchical levels: individual, routine, organisational, external (or institutional) and ideological. Session (2003, p. 37), however, stresses that these forces do not influence news independent of others, "rather they interact in complex ways so that whether an event or message becomes news (and exactly how it is shaped and presented) depends on the relative intensity of the various forces at each hierarchical level."

The nature of journalism requires that journalists carry out surveillance of the society and report their findings or observations to the public based on journalistically acclaimed notion of newsworthiness. It is, however, practically impossible for journalists to witness every occurrence first-hand. Hence, more often than not, they rely on sources for the stories they report. These sources may be individuals in positions to know specific details, and also make clarifications about certain phenomenon or occurrence by virtue of their positions or expertise (Fishman, 1980). Hence their reports are naturally reported as news information in the media. Sources in media stories may also be individuals who happen to witness occurrences. Reporters rely on their accounts of events, and report information gathered as presented by eyewitnesses. This is because, the reporter is most likely to be absent at spontaneous events and tend to rely on eye-witnesses' accounts at the scene, which is presented as news information to the public. Such accounts could be gathered by individual

journalists or, in recent times, directly uploaded by eyewitnesses unto media organisations' online platforms.

Becoming a source in traditional mass media is however not automatic and tend to be influenced by the individual's ability to provide the required information for the reporter within the pre-existing routine of news workers. The media is noted for its wide reach, with the possibility of influencing public opinion by "providing people with meanings" (Oso, 2014, p. 202). Hence, individuals or institutions who get to serve as sources of reference in media reports are able to present their viewpoints on issues, with the attendant possibility of directing public discourse. Therefore, there is the tendency for certain individuals or groups to seek media access to convey their messages and possibly direct public opinion, or just to gain popularity. Oso notes the importance of media access to social and political actors who often crave media access having realised that the control of the media space gives them "the power to define issues, set agenda, and promote a particular frame and meaning" (p. 202).

There are a number of perspectives on the determination of how news sources are selected, and whose viewpoints are projected in terms of who is given access to the media. Oso (2014) identifies two of the existing perspectives as reporter-source relations, and news routines and production process.

2.1. *The reporter-source relations*

This describes the existing relationship between the reporter and news sources. The reporter is perceived as the professional who has the journalistic skills to search for occurring newsworthy events; determine which should be reported; and how the selected event is eventually reported to the public based on pre-existing news values which are likely to evoke the attention of the audience in the story. Having made the decision to cover an event, the reporter presumably has the prerogative of determining what information is eventually reported and prioritised in the final report. Oso, however, notes that scholars have criticised this perspective promoting adherence to professionalism as it often leads to the projection of the official viewpoint over others.

Another aspect of the reporter-source relations is based on exchange theory with reporters and news sources maintaining a symbiotic relationship in the news process. In this relationship, the reporters rely on the sources to provide them with newsworthy information to report to the public, while the source rely on the reporters to gain media access and "get their messages across to the public" (Oso, 2014, p. 206). Fishman (1980) observes that through this collaboration, news promoters tend to complement the news gathering process for media organisations in exchange for 'publicity and legitimation'. Fishman succinctly describes the adaptation to the situation by both groups thus,

News promoters are only too happy to offer their services to news workers. Indeed, knowing the nature of the news workers' bond to them, they have learned to cater to the practical concerns of journalists in order to guarantee that what they have to say is reported. Thus, politicians provide journalists with advance copies of speeches; press conferences are scheduled at convenient hours so that reporters may meet deadlines; press agents write news releases in story format; and special bureaucratic personnel –media contacts– are assigned the job of working with the journalists who cover their agencies (Fishman, 1980, p. 152).

2.2. *News routine and news production process*

News routine and news production process also influence selection of news and news sources (Oso, 2014). News routine is defined as "those patterned routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs which help journalists to take care of limited resources at their disposal and the vast amount of raw materials that they have to put together as the news" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Oso describes it as "a mechanism for control and discipline in the news making process, and for maximising available resources" (2014, p. 207).

News routine invariably provides an established procedure to news workers to carry out their duties and effectively manage their organisations' limited resources available for the news production process. One of such established news routine is the creation of beat in news media organisations (Fishman, 1980; Oso, 2014). Fishman (1980) explains the concept of beat topically and territorially, noting that news workers often described beat "as places to go and people to see, or as a series of topics one is responsible for covering" (p. 29). Similarly, "a beat could be a topic or subject area (e.g. health, sport), or territorial/geographical area (e.g. the presidency, court)" which often "serves as arena for interaction with sources to generate news on regular basis" (Oso, 2014, p. 208).

The beat system has, however, been criticised for promoting the domination of the news media with bureaucratic sources over alternative viewpoints (Oso, 2014). Oso observes that this is because the established beats are often bureaucratic organisations structured to meet the information needs of reporters by providing regular flow of bureaucratic information for reporters, while providing other support services to enable reporters on the beat work effectively. Describing the expectations from the beat, Fishman notes that reporters are often expected to turn in stories daily even when nothing significant seems to be happening, with editors considering the beat as a "bottomless pit of stories where one can always find something to write about" (Fishman, 1980, p. 35).

The expectation of regular flow of news stories from reporters on the beat creates additional challenges for the beat reporter who needs to effectively manage the bureaucratic structure of his/her beat, with the expectation from the newsroom of meeting set deadline. As noted by Fishman (1980, p. 37) "covering a beat requires that the reporter follow bureaucratically organised activities and information which unfolds at a pace independent of the time demands and writing limitations imposed on the reporter by the home news organisation". Hence, bureaucratic institutions, tend to "subsidise the news gathering and production process" (Oso, 2014); relieving reporters of some of their journalistic duties. The editorial support provided by bureaucratic institutions often aids reporters on the beat to effectively execute and also cope with the demand of their jobs through the provision of readily prepared official accounts of events occurring within the beat. Relying on bureaucratic sources is therefore seen as a matter of necessity even with their potential to dominate the news frame by creating "structures of knowledge consisting of what there is to know in the first place (possible knowledge) and who knows what, where and when (distributed knowledge)" (Fishman, 1980, p. 52).

Seminal studies on news routines generally agree that "news is a construction of reality and not a mirror of reality" with "organisational and routine factors privileging the voices of the powerful in the news" (Oso, 2014, p. 207). The beat system in news routine is undoubtedly a major factor influencing source selection and how news is eventually constructed and framed in the news production process. Since official accounts of events are usually provided, the likelihood is for the beat reporters to adopt the frame of reference adopted by the bureaucratic sources in writing stories about occurrences on the beat. Session (2003, p. 26) also notes that "journalists' reliance on routine channels of information may enable sources to control the information received by journalists to a greater extent". Oso, thus, decries the beat system for promoting inequality in media access, often excluding sources outside the feasibility of established beat location. He observes the tendency of beat reporters becoming immersed in the system they cover, thus compromising the social distance expected of them in maintaining autonomy in the news gathering process.

The media as the fourth estate of the realm are expected "to give adequate expression to the diverse viewpoints and arguments" within the society (Oso, 2014, p. 203). This study thus examines media accessibility and the diversity of opinions projected in reportage of MCH-related issues. It examines the sociology of reportage of MCH issues; investigating underlining reasons influencing coverage of related issues in Nigerian newspapers, through newspaper

content analysis and interviews with selected newspaper health editors. The following research question thus guided the study:

1. Who are the dominant players in newspaper coverage of MCH issues?
2. How do the dominant players influence newspaper coverage of MCH issues?

3. Method

The study adopted the content analysis and in-depth interview methods. The content analysis aspect entails analysing all news, features and editorials published in four selected national newspapers in Nigeria. The selected newspapers were purposively selected based on their perceived popularity across Nigeria, and in specific regions of the country. The newspapers were sampled over a 12-month period from July 2015 to June 2016. This represents the period around the end of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and early phase of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) with the expectation that Nigerian media may focus attention on the country's inability to meet set targets of the MDG, and perhaps stimulate public discourse on what needs to be done to attain newly set targets of the SDG. All news, features and editorials published over the sampled period formed the units of analyses for the study. The content analysis examined five variables covering newspaper, story type, month, quoted sources, and MCH promoters. Inter-coder reliability, involving two coders was calculated using about 8% of the total analysed stories resulting in reliability coefficient ranging from KALPHA = 1.00 to KALPHA = 0.91 depending on the complexities in identifying the appropriate option for each variable.

For the in-depth interview, 10 health editors from 10 identified leading newspapers in the country (Olukotun, 2017), were sampled for the study. This resulted in the selection of five females and five males occurring by sheer coincidence. A semi-structured interview guide guided the interview sessions, enabling the researchers to ask following up questions that may arise in the course of the interviews. The Interviews were conducted at different times in May, 2017. To protect the identities of the interviewees, they were code named female health editor (FHE 1-5) and male health editor (MHE 1-5), against their respective newspapers identified as Newspaper 1-10.

4. Results and discussion

A total of 1062 stories (Table 1) were analysed in the study with straight news dominating across the sampled newspapers. Features also had a fair share, with editorials on MCH-related issues occurring the least.

Table 1: Distribution of analysed contents.

Newspaper Content Type	Newspapers (frequency)				TOTAL
	Punch	Nation	Daily Trust	Leadership	
News	145	121	280	200	746
Features	80	70	63	87	300
Editorial	3	3	4	6	16
Total	228	194	347	293	1062

Source: Own elaboration. Field data, 2017.

Table 2: Monthly distribution of analysed MCH-related stories.

Month of Publication	Newspapers (frequency)				TOTAL
	Punch	Nation	Daily Trust	Leadership	
July 2015	16	28	31	9	84
August 2015	28	15	34	29	106
September 2015	13	16	26	19	74
October 2015	11	19	34	38	102
November 2015	15	12	36	31	94
December 2015	8	9	29	16	62
January 2016	16	19	35	25	95
February 2016	44	19	31	43	137
March 2016	22	15	27	25	89
April 2016	15	13	20	15	63
May 2016	18	16	27	19	80
June 2016	22	13	17	24	76
Total	228	194	347	293	1062
Monthly Average	19	16	29	24	89

Source: Own elaboration. Field data, 2017.

Table 2 presents the number of MCH-related stories published by the sampled newspapers in each month of the sample period. Collectively, the newspapers published the highest number of MCH-related stories in the month of February 2016 with one in eight (12.9%, n=137) of the analysed contents published therein. It is followed by items published in August, 2015 which accounted for one in ten of analysed items (10%, n=106). An examination of the stories published in these months show preponderance of Zika virus-related stories in February 2016, with stories on breastfeeding featuring more in August 2015. The Zika virus outbreak was declared a global emergency by the World Health Organisation in February, 2016, thus drawing global attention to the issue. The main cause of concern was the adverse effect of the virus on pregnant women possibly leading to increasing number of births of babies with microcephaly, a condition in which babies are born with unusually small heads, underdeveloped brains, amid other neurological disorders. World Breastfeeding Week is commemorated annually from August 1 to 7, to draw public attention to breastfeeding issues. Hence, a sizeable number of breastfeeding-related stories were published in August commemorating the week, and its theme for the year. The sampled newspapers published the least stories in December 2015 (5.8%, n=62).

Individually, *Punch* and *Leadership* published highest number of MCH-related stories in February 2016, while *The Nation* recorded its second highest number in the same month. *Daily Trust* however maintained a general pattern in its coverage of MCH-related issues with no significant increase in February despite the trend in other newspapers. Its publication of 31 MCH-related stories is well within its monthly average of 29. It recorded the highest number of stories in November 2015 (10.4%, n=36) with no particular issue that month.

The Nation recorded the highest number of MCH-related stories in July 2015. There seemed to be no identifiable reason for this other than the newspaper's repeated coverage of series of developments on a human angle story that broke earlier that month, involving a mother of three sets of twins whose husband absconded, following news that his expectant wife was expecting another set of twins. The newspaper published seven stories about the family during the month culminating in the return of the father following rehabilitation of the family by the Lagos State Government, and philanthropic gestures from members of the public.

Punch, and *The Nation* follow similar pattern, with publication of their least contents in December 2015 while *Daily Trust* maintained its relatively even coverage of the issues. Even though, *Leadership* actually recorded its least coverage in July 2015, this could not be adjudged the month with the paper's least coverage as only six editions of the newspaper were available for analysis.

Table 3: Distribution of quoted sources in analysed contents.

Newsmakers / Quoted Sources	Newspapers (Percentage)				TOTAL
	Punch	Nation	D. Trust	Leadership	
Government officials	19.9	26.0	23.3	27.2	23.9
Local and international aid agencies and civil societies	19.5	22.1	23.8	27.7	23.4
Medical expert / Personnel	19.7	12.5	14.6	10.4	14.4
Affected Individuals	13.7	16.0	15.0	8.8	13.5
Scientists / Researchers	8.9	1.0	6.6	10.1	6.9
Advertiser / Corporate Org.	5.4	5.4	2.1	2.4	3.5
Medical Professional Bodies or Rep	2.7	2.6	3.6	3.2	3.0
Wives of elected official	2.2	4.2	3.2	1.6	2.8
Foreign government official	4.0	1.6	2.3	2.9	2.7
Traditional Leader / Community Rep	0.5	1.0	1.9	2.1	1.5
Celebrity/Brand	1.3	3.2	0.3	1.3	1.3
Ambassador/Socialites	1.1	2.2	0.5	0.5	1.0
Other Professionals / Trade groups	0.5	1.6	1.5	0.3	1.0
Ordinary Citizen / Eyewitnesses	0.5	0.3	0.8	1.3	0.8
Cleric / Religious Organisation officials	0	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.2
Traditional Birth Attendants	0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1
Politicians					
Total (n)	100% (371)	100% (312)	100% (618)	100% (375)	100% (1676)

Source: Own elaboration. Field data, 2017.

Table 3 shows the categories of sources directly quoted in the MCH-related stories published in the sampled newspapers over the sample period. The options are not mutually exclusive. While some contents included up to five categories of sources, some did not quote any source at all. Sixteen categories of sources were identified in the contents occurring in a total of 1,676 instances across the sampled newspapers. A category is coded as occurring once in a story even if different individuals of the same category were found. For instance, a story on a planned event in which a federal government official and two state government officials were quoted will be coded as one entry for government official. Other category of sources (e.g. medical expert) who possibly spoke at such event will also be recorded as another single source entry irrespective of their numbers. Hence, such story was coded as having government source once and medical expert once.

Collectively, government sources (24%, n=401) and aid agencies/civil societies (23.4%, n=392) were the most quoted sources among the 1676 quoted sources identified in the analysed stories across the sampled newspapers. The reported government officials included elected federal and state level officials, government appointees and officials of government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). Aid agencies and civil societies included international and local health organisations, United Nations Organisations, international aid

organisations, and civil society groups. Medical experts (14.4%; n=241) and individuals directly affected by the issues (13.5%; n=227) also gained fair inclusion.

On the flip side, politicians (not currently holding official positions), traditional birth attendants (TBAs), were the least quoted sources across the sampled newspapers with 0.1 percent (n=1), 0.2 percent (n=3), percent coverage respectively. Both were never quoted in *Punch* and *Leadership*, while *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* included both once or twice during the study period.

Table 4: Promoters of MCH issues in sampled newspapers.

Promoters of Stories	Newspapers (Percentage)				TOTAL
	Punch	Nation	D. Trust	Leadership	
Aid agencies and civil societies	19.7	23.2	35.7	32.6	29.0
Government MDA	18.2	30.5	29.3	31.3	27.6
Affected individuals	12.6	21.3	7.3	6.5	10.9
Medical experts / professional bodies	22.7	7.3	6.3	5.7	10.0
Researchers/ Research institutions	13.1	0.6	9.3	10.9	9.0
Corporate organisation	7.6	9.1	2.3	4.3	5.3
Wives of Public officials	2.5	3.7	3.3	2.2	2.9
Foreign officials	2.0	1.8	2.0	3.9	2.5
Other professionals or Trade groups	1.0	1.2	2.7	0.4	1.5
Religious groups	0.5	0.0	1.3	0	0.6
Politicians/political parties	0	1.2	0.3	0.4	0.4
Community leaders/ Groups/ members	0	0.0	0	1.3	0.3
Ordinary citizens	0	0	0	0.4	0.1
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(n)	(198)	(164)	(300)	(230)	(892)

Source: Own elaboration. Field data, 2017.

Table 4 above shows the identified promoters of MCH-related issues covered in the sampled newspapers. The promoters were mostly those initiating events or raising issues for journalists to report. Aid agencies and civil societies were the most identified promoters of MCH issues in the published contents analysed across the four sampled newspapers accounting for 29% (n=259) of identified 892 promoters reported over the sample period. On the reverse, ordinary citizens, religious groups, politicians or political parties; and community leaders or groups were among the least promoters.

Findings from the study thus identified aid agencies, civil societies, and government, as dominant players driving coverage of MCH issues in Nigeria. These health promoters (e.g. UNICEF, WHO, aid organisations, corporate organisations, civil societies) facilitates coverage of MCH issues in varied ways. These include dedication of specific days to commemorate specific ailments or issues, planning events, workshops and training for journalists, facilitating field trips for journalists, issuing press releases, among others. It appears health journalists have come to accept such interventions as acceptable norms in coverage of health issues despite their potential to drive the agenda of vested interests in the media. Respondents however noted that such interventions have become essential to extensive media coverage of health issues in Nigeria due to the appalling economic situations of many newspaper organisations, coupled with the need to provide guidance for health journalists (especially the inexperienced ones) who may be unaware of the existence or severity of specific health issues. They therefore regarded interventions from health promoters as a welcome development necessary to drive the desired change. According to respondents:

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If journalists are paid well, nobody would dictate the agenda of what should go into the paper or shouldn't ... If I don't have money to leave my house, for example, to the town, do you think I would be looking for story somewhere? I don't have money to go to town, I don't have money to even call up somebody to interview. So except someone calls me that they have an event; I would now go there maybe because of the little thing (financial gratification) that you would get that would help you to move around for the next two, three days. So that's the situation. Journalist don't have money, they are poor. And if they don't have money to move around, don't expect them to do something good for you except they have money (FHE 1 of Newspaper 1).

When you direct attention to happenings in the health sector, I know of few NGOs that try to create awareness, try to direct the attention of journalists to things that are happening. I know of one NGO that took journalists out of Lagos to show them some remote parts of Lagos where women have to cross the river before they can get to a health facility. And because such NGO did that, we saw journalists actually writing features, writing extensively on things like that... (So, even though) I think journalists are committed. We (still) need people to show them what is happening, which they may not be aware of. They are not in the hospital setting. They don't really know what is going on unless there are people that will come out and volunteer information (MHE 5 of Newspaper 9).

You say we should report on these things. How will an organisation that is owing salaries fund a trip like say to Borno¹ to go and do stories like that. If not for organisations like UNICEF, WHO, and others... So, they are not the ones setting agenda, but because they also have desire for it to be addressed, knowing the power of the media. That is why they have come in to help out... (FHE 2 of Newspaper 4).

Sometimes you need people to set agenda for you... you need some people giving you ideas. Nobody is an island. So, sometimes, it's not about somebody setting agenda. Of course, somebody can set an agenda for you, but if I'm not interested, what happens? I won't write (FHE 4 of Newspaper 8).

The media is one of the problems. The media shouldn't be carried along. Agenda should not be set for it. But, nowadays, the reverse is the case. And for obvious reasons. You have a lot of challenges. Recession is one. Many media organisations are barely surviving. In fact, they just want to be relevant (MHE 3 of Newspaper 6).

Other justifications welcoming the interventions of health promoters and other interest groups include the need to draw attention to specific health issues due to limited knowledge of some health journalists, coupled with the lack of specialisation on the health beat.

The media should actually set agenda. But in a situation where you just have somebody who has little or no knowledge in health care, who is not a healthcare professional, who doesn't even know much about health delivery system, it will be new. In fact, you have people who read just anything, not a science-based course, being health reporters... Thank God, now journalists are specialising. So you can have journalists on the health beat for years, reporting that alone... There is still a lot of inexperienced journalists on the health beat, who cannot on their own begin to set agenda... (MHE 5 of Newspaper 9).

A respondent also noted that honouring invitation from health promoters sometimes offers reporters the possibility of landing bigger stories, providing opportunities to meet stakeholders and affected individuals which could lead to the publication of good stories that could trend online.

...it's not as if we wait to be called. Of course, there are events to be attended, like if anything is happening in the health sector...they can invite us to come and cover, it's normal. But you see if you don't honour such invitations too, you may not really have the big news. Sometimes, they just invite you that, 'We are launching a drug'... and then you get there, you may stumble on big story. May be people who are suffering that particular

¹ About 1,600 km driving distance from Lagos where the respondent works.

health issue, they may decide to invade the place, and then you get serious news because you are able to interview them one-on-one...you get your stories from there. So, they may not necessarily set the agenda, but even if they do, that is the reality of modern journalism (FHE 5 of Newspaper 10).

Health promoters are thus considered ready sources for health stories by journalists, an essential factor for news workers in their source selection process. In addition, they are able to raise the agenda on their issues of interest to become popular topic of discourse within the polity through extensive public engagement and creation of commemorative days to draw public attention to such issues. Journalists often consider current happenings in the selection of issues or topic for coverage. As noted by many respondents, issues on the front burners of public discussion have to be reported. The content analysis aspect of this study found a prevailing tendency to cover issues around breaking news or unfolding events or issues. Respondents noted that availability of planned events around MCH care tend to increase coverage of MCH-related issues since journalists often focus on current happenings for their stories. Most respondents identified coverage of organised events among their daily routines. Hence, the establishment of more health intervention programmes, with facilitation for media coverage of such programmes are likely to enhance coverage of MCH issues.

Respondents acknowledged the importance of commemorative days in drawing attention to specific health issues that might otherwise have been neglected. The danger, however, is that some health issues may not be reported beyond their commemorative days. The tendency to limit coverage around commemorative days was noted among respondents with some stressing the need to extend coverage of pressing health issues such as those relating to MCH beyond such days to continually keep the issue on the front burner of public discussion and government attention. According to one of the respondents,

To a large extent, they (commemorative days) influence what we report mostly...On World AIDS Day, which is December 1, you can't be writing on cancer when everybody is talking about HIV/AIDS, you will look stupid...because on those days, NGOs, governments, development partners will organise events, make conferences, symposiums, seminars, workshops, to create awareness on these diseases, and those things have to be reported. Analysis have to be done on progress made, may be in treating diseases, curtailing its spread, etc. So in that context, you have no choice than to focus on that disease in that period... Whatever is on the front burner you have to focus on it and address it (MHE 1 of Newspaper 2).

Hence, health promoters with required resources are often able to promote their issues of interest beyond the commemorative days, organising events for media coverage, as well as sensitisation workshops and seminars for journalists; issuing press statements, sponsoring field trips of journalists to locations most affected by their issues of interest, among others. Invariably, health issues getting media attention are often those having resourceful health promoters to push them into public discourse. Respondents attributed the increased prominence of some health issues in the media to government interest in the issue, and availability of other stakeholders, promoters, or corporations, with vested interests also pushing those issues in the media. This, respondents noted, also increases the frequency of occurrence or activities related to an issue made available for media coverage.

Many organisations invite journalists to write on particular issues in exchange for stipends or advert placements in their respective publications. In a bid to satisfy them, you go ahead and do it. You see a number of stories on family planning, for instance, because you have very powerful NGOs, organisations, with a lot of money and everything, pushing that agenda. So, it's the organisations that can push their agenda more strongly than the media portray, because the media doesn't have any agenda of its own. All these things we are writing, it's another person...we are just a third party, we are pushing it for

somebody else. So, it depends on how that person can influence us (MHE 3 of Newspaper 6).

It's actually what interest our health authorities that media reports. The media is just a reflection of what is happening in the country. If government, or health authorities decides to draw attention to some of these issues, you will see that the media will follow. I know, diarrhoea kills children, and there was a time UNICEF was focused on that, the media flowed along. So, it depends really. I don't think the media can really work in isolation (MHE 5 of Newspaper 9).

A respondent therefore attributed the limited coverage of some issues to limited activities of the health promoters in such area.

Maybe you can look at it the other way round that the civil societies, that are also supposed to help to drive these issues, are not doing their work well (MHE 4 of Newspaper 7).

The content analysis aspect of this study found a prevailing tendency to cover issues around commemorative days. Many respondents considered commemorative days as a major determinant in coverage of health issues, influencing coverage and providing an enabling environment for journalists to freely write on such issues. According a respondent,

We can't but celebrate them [commemorative days]. They are supposed to also help us to create awareness. Even if your *oga* [boss] wants to say no, you can use that as an alibi (FHE 4 of Newspaper 8).

Although some decried the practice of reporting health issues around commemorative days, noting the need to continually cover pressing health issues to drive desired change, the dominant view and prevailing circumstances suggested otherwise.

There are lots of health issues that are preventable. We need to continue to educate the citizens, we need to continue to put pressure on the stakeholders, the government, so as to cover more loop holes (MHE 2 of Newspaper 3).

I don't think there is any media organisation or journalist that will wait for commemorative days before they write on maternal and child health. If it does exist in certain places, that will be an anomaly on media practice. I think it is a drawback in the situation if so, because it will not augur well for you to write on such days, and thereafter forget it. The issue will not be on the front burner of public discourse, with policy makers, and there will be low intervention towards tackling it (FHE 3 of Newspaper 5).

Hence, having more commemorative days on MCH-related issues may likely ensure greater coverage especially for those presently neglected in the media, enabling journalists to examine more MCH issues in details, to draw necessary attention for desired change.

Health promoters tend to also influence coverage of health issues through provision of donor funding for issues of interest and in specific localities or regions. Findings from the study suggest that the availability of donor funding drives coverage of MCH issues while regions or issues with limited availability of donor funding tend to be under-covered as there are often limited interventions on MCH which the media can cover. Respondents noted limited availability of donor funding to drive interventions around MCH which in turn limits the interventions and other activities around MCH which the media can report. Where available, such funds are often directed mainly towards MCH interventions in the Northern part of the country due to the severity of MCH in the region.

Nigeria depends on donor funding for most of the things they do. So, you may ask yourself the question, "Where are the donor funds going to?". That's where NGO go to. That is where civil societies go to. That is where people do more independent studies... So, maybe, just maybe, they are not doing enough in terms of maternal and child health... Even people that want to do investment, they look at the gravity of whatever they are going to invest in before they do. If you notice, most of the UN funds or whatever around that maternal thing

goes to the North... And it's as a result of what the NGOs or civil societies do most times that journalists report... The idea is, it is most of those specialised reports or survey that brings the official status to the situation that calls attention to it most times (MHE 4 of Newspaper 7).

Increased donor funding is thus essential for increasing media coverage of health issues. Findings from the IDI support the need for more notable individuals (e.g. Aliko Dangote, Bill and Melinda Gates) and civil society organisations to get involved in interventions towards improving MCH as they are more likely to attract media attention to the issues. Respondents at various times in the course of the IDI noted the importance to the clout of the individuals or organisation involved in promoting health issues as a major influencer for drawing attention to health issues and even gain prominent coverage of such issue while the intervention lasts in the public domain. This was evident in the content analysis aspect of this study with the Aliko Dangote and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations' intervention towards improving child health conditions in five northern states receiving extensive and prominent coverage across the sampled newspapers.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that some aspects of MCH tend to get coverage over others, with greater possibility for those having specific interventions around them, backed by notable personalities, or of interest to government, international and local health organisations, and the civil societies. MCH-targeted interventions appear essential in driving coverage of MCH issues, and the indelible role of government, civil societies, and aid organisations in drawing attention to the issues. There is need for more support in other areas of MCH to also draw attention to such issues. The harsh economic condition in the newspaper industry gives credence to the need for support from such health promoters in driving attention of relevant MCH issues within the society. Hence, only issues getting the attention of government, or promoted by powerful organisations or groups with necessary resources to attract media coverage to their activities or interventions, may continue to dominate media space.

The continuing reliance of external factors to drive coverage of issues has however been a source of worry for some practitioners. Veteran Nigerian journalist and columnist, Sonala Olumhense lamented the decline in the quality of journalism practice in contemporary Nigeria in an interview with *The Punch* to mark his 30 years as a columnist,

I think it has changed for worse... The most significant concern for me is that Nigerian journalism now sometimes sounds like a bulletin of the Ministry of Information. Stories are not about what is being done or not done – or who is responsible for them – but quotations of government officials and smirking spokesmen. There are few, if any, investigations; where there is one there is no follow up. Journalism is not institutionally hunting down the big stories. In the tradition in which I was raised, government officials feared journalists; today, journalists fear government officials. Ask yourself, why? (Abidde 2013, p. 80; cited in Jimoh, 2015).

Increased reliance on official information hand-outs from government and other stakeholders which is evidenced in this study is at variance with the principle of development journalism (Aggarwala, 1978, cited in Ogan, 1980). The prevailing poor economic situation of newspapers in the country undermines the independence of the media as they are more susceptible to promoting issues of interest to specific groups or individuals, over and above public interest (Akinfeleye, 2003; Ige, 2013). The prevailing poor economic situation of Nigerian newspapers also affects the working conditions of journalists; impeding critical evaluation of government projects and policies on MCH, 'its impact on people as claimed by government officials, and as it actually is' (Aggarwala, 1979, cited in Dare, 2000, p. 164; Oso, 2002, p. 121).

The use of medical experts as columnists in some of the sampled newspapers is an added advantage in the use of newspapers for public health education. It presents medical experts the opportunity to directly enlighten members of the public on health issues with limited possibility of their views being distorted in the editorial process. The findings of this study thus suggest that medical practitioners in Nigeria are also getting involved in the business of health promotion and education in the media to provide accurate, factual, useful and appropriate information to the teeming audience as suggested in existing literature (e.g. Barnum, 1974; Conti, 2013). This is despite the dominance of external actors with peculiar interests driving coverage of major health issues in the country.

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