Media Discourse on Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria: Framing Narratives from Selected Newspaper Columnists’ Opinions

Iyorza, Stanislaus. (Ph.D)
Department of Mass Communication
University of Calabar, Nigeria.
Email: stanisiyorza@unical.edu.ng
      orjighstan@gmail.com
      Phone: +2347064903578

Ekwok, Lawrence. (Ph.D)
Department of Mass Communication
University of Calabar, Nigeria.
Email: merlaw2002@yahoo.com
      ekwoklawrence@gmail.com
      Phone: +2348035525785

Abstract
Amidst Covid-19 phenomenon, newspaper columnists in Nigeria wrote their opinions to make clarifications and explain the effects of Nigeria’s response on her citizens. This paper seeks to critically examine newspaper columnists’ position on the coverage of the Covid-19 and lockdown in Nigeria and to frame a narrative from their opinions on the effects of the lockdown in Nigeria and their perspectives on Nigeria’s approach to addressing lockdown issues in Nigeria during the period under study. As an explorative research, the paper adopted the theme analyses design and examined six (6) newspaper columns on Covid-19 and lockdown in Nigeria by six (6) conveniently and randomly selected columnists from six (6) online versions on Nigerian newspapers out of 46 in the country. Findings revealed that the newspaper columnists’ presentations of opinions were substantially standard but not logically balanced in some cases, capable of depriving the audience of the requisite facts to understanding the true situation of Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria. The paper recommended that newspaper columnists should present their opinions in a more balanced manner with adequate information and reasons for solicited actions.

Key Words: Columns, Columnists, Covid-19, Discourse, Lockdown, Media, Newspaper.

Introduction
Comments, opinions and perspectives of newspaper editors, media interviewees and guest writers are generally observed to be well thought out, logical and calculated to address emergent societal challenges and proffer possible solutions to governments in some cases. The appearance of newspaper columns and columnists’ perspectives is more of a daily than periodic affair hence the nature of the newspaper. A newspaper column is “an article that appears regularly, expressing a viewpoint” (Ike, 2005, p.39). By implication, a newspaper columnist offers depth to news stories that appear simple and presents perspectives that are mainly subjective but logical.

Historically, Encyclopedia Britannica (2010) recounts that in the 1920s columns proliferated in many fields, including politics, economics, books, movies, society, medicine, homemaking, sports and contemporary life and ideas. National syndication of columns increased rapidly and the internet greatly expanded the reach of individual columnist to a global audience.

Significantly, such views on events, when coordinated and framed, are expected to serve the research information needs of the government and historical documentation needs of media practitioners and institutions of learning for posterity. Columnists have reflected and offered opinions on many social, economic, political and health issues in various societies. The novel Corona Virus (Covid-19), a global pandemic, gave columnists all over the world another window to offer their opinions on how the issue was handled, what was not done and what should have been done. In Nigeria, like in other parts of the world, the novel Covid-19 took the country by surprise and caught the nation almost unprepared as captured below:
The first case of Corona Virus Disease, code named Covid-19 was recorded in Wuhan, a city in China in December 2019, and spread in quick succession to other cities of the world. World’s infections had risen to over 1.1 million with more than 65000 deaths by second week of April 2020 and to more than 10.6 million by the 2nd of July 2020. In Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Health in confirmed the first case of Corona Virus COVID – 19 on 27th February 2020 and first death on the 23rd March 2020...by second week of April 2020, the country’s case profile rose to 232 with 5 deaths but by second day of July 2020, Nigeria’s infection rate had risen to over 26,800 cases (Iyorza & Ojorgu, 2020, p.1).

By 28th of July, Covid-19 infections figures were reported to be 41,180 persons. Some parts of the world had begun a shutdown of their borders while a country like China commenced a lockdown of her economy earlier, Nigeria began a shutdown of its public institutions by 23rd of March 2020. A total lockdown of Nigeria’s economy including international and interstate borders was gradually adopted in the last week of March, 2020 and lasted for more than four months with gradual easing down. A number of facts, myths and fake news evolved about the Covid-19 pandemic. The worse scenario was the effect of the lockdown on Nigerian citizens as it seemed differently in other parts of the world especially advanced nations. The Covid-19 lockdown also exposed the state of readiness of Nigeria in the wake of epidemics and pandemics. This gave newspaper columnists another opportunity to express their views and put them into perspective amidst doubts cast on the reality and information management of the virus and effects of the pandemic in Nigeria’s lockdown.

The Covid-19 pandemic that began to ravage the world in December 2019 unavoidably caught the attention of columnists, most of who initiated discourse on issues that fell out from the lockdown, what they thought and their experiences of the covid-19 lockdown and their opinions about the pandemic. Their views, opinions and observations as reflected in their columns on pages of Nigerian newspapers were quite weighty and worth reviewing. A review, according to Rabiu (2014) is also called a “report” and gives the writer a chance to become a critic of someone’s writing. It is a personal response to a write-up and analysis of its strengths and weaknesses. The objective of any opinion write-up is to acquaint one’s perspective of it and to help readers decide whether or not they would like to read or acquire useful information from the discourse.

A study of the newspaper columnists’ opinions on Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria from selected newspaper columns is relevant in addressing the problem of inconsistent information on covid-19 and lockdown effects in Nigeria. Many stories about Covid-19 are told by every social media participant in Nigeria while others are suggesting possible cure to the virus. Many Nigerian citizens behave doubtfully about the reality of the disease while others are appear to be upset about Government’s efforts to contain the virus if it exists as many Nigerians appear to be ignoring the call to adopting safety measures in the country’s efforts to fight Covid-19. Whatever the situation, the problem can best assume a straight record from the narratives of newspaper columnists.

Objectives of the study
The objectives of this paper include:

i. To identify the newspaper columnists’ views on the issues of media coverage of the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria;
ii. To critically review the perspectives of selected Nigerian newspaper columnists on the effects of the Lockdown on Nigerians

iii. To critically assess Nigerian newspaper columnists’ opinions on Nigerian Government’s efforts at addressing lockdown issues in the wake of Covid-19 in Nigeria.

Research Questions

i. What are the newspaper columnists’ views on the issues of media coverage of the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria?

ii. Did the selected Nigerian newspaper columnists adequately and logically present their opinions on the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown on Nigerians?

iii. How did the selected Nigerian newspaper columnists’ present their opinions on Nigerian Government’s efforts at addressing lockdown issues in the wake of Covid-19 in Nigeria?

Review of Literature

Newspaper columnists and their experiences in Nigeria’s Covid-19 lockdown

Among all media of communication, the newspaper and magazine enjoy the documentary advantage over radio and television, especially the printed forms (Belch and Belch, 2001). The segmentation of the newspaper allows for more participation of reporters, photojournalists, editors and guest writers’ opinion. Guest writers are also opinion writers or columnists. They present their opinions on burning issues in columns set aside for them in newspaper. More specifically, a columnist is “a writer using the same space daily in a newspaper or magazine publication” (Ike, 2005, p.34). The preceding definition appears to be limited in scope because guest writers are occasionally granted columns to reflect their opinions which may not be regular. The idea of columns and the columnists is captured below:

Columnist is the author or editor of a regular signed contribution to a newspaper, magazine or Web site, usually under a permanent title and devoted to comment on some aspects of contemporary scene. The column may be humorous or serious, on one subject or on life in general, frivolous in tone or heavily freighted with good advice on manners, morals, or other subjects of interest (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010).

Suffice it to state that a column is a reflection of the writers’ individual tastes and point of view, whether it is concerned with any topical issue. Hasan (2013) opines that a column expresses the opinion of a writer (guest writer and editor) on a particular subject of interest. Observably, a columnist requires an ability to project a personality that engages and establishes rapport with the audience in addition to knowledge of the subject matter. Community Tool Box (2020) describes someone who is not part of the publication’s normal staff, but who appears in the Opinion and Editorial (Op-ed) section occasionally as a guest columnist. Fundamentally, the columnist affects his readers through his functions in four (4) ways: he brings more of the public over to his way of thinking; he shows his side of the controversial issues; he re-opens public dialogue on issues that have fallen out of the public mind and he counters his opponent’s arguments against his group or initiative.

The reasons for interest of columnists in reporting in the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria are numerous. Adeniyi (2018) says some of the reasons are based on the need for the columnists to interrogate their minds on issues emanating from the entire Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in Nigeria. Mbamalu (2020) identifies one issue which is the shrouding of Covid-19 information in secrecy. The issue is based on the observation that the
need for public safety which should allow the Nigerian media reporters the opportunity to access the health information to report to the public is hindered by the health privacy policy. The argument is based also on the opinions of the columnists that media reporters were not allowed free access to Covid-19 information while the Federal Government of Nigeria remained conservative with information, giving room for rumours to breed.

Many columns have been effective in other countries’ polity. According to Adeniyi (2018), The Washington Columnist, Walter Lippmann, played a leading part in bringing the Vietnam War to an end through his write-ups. In Nigeria, the works of columnists appeared less effective despite being more informative and detailed. Obi (2020) opines that media efforts did not focus adequately on the origin of the Covid-19, the efforts made by different climes in the world to find a vaccine nor on the need to use face masks for prevention. Columnists expected that the media should have been at the forefront of demystifying the controversies surrounding the efficacy of earlier claimed vaccines, or the health implications of putting on facemasks. Igwe (2020) focuses on the issue of policy response and its failures in Nigeria and examines the fallout and challenges of the lockdown in the country. Arjiromanus (2020) examines Nigerians’ experiences on the lockdown and suggests that pains of the lockdown could be more severe than imagined. The perspectives of the columnists therefore indicated the various dimensions of the Covid-19 lockdown that informed their discourse and how issues can prompt topical concerns in the Nigerian newspaper columns.

Previous studies carried out empirically also show that the essence of the Covid-19 lockdown was a mixture of failure and success. A study conducted by Iyorza and Ojorgu (2020)’s study showed that most Nigerian citizens did not access any form of palliatives against the Federal Government’s wide publicity on distribution of palliatives to the poorest of the poor even when they were compelled to stay at home during the lockdown. The same study indicated that the absence of Government’s support was partly responsible for low level of compliance to directives on safety.

Thus majority of Nigerian citizens could not use hand sanitizers, however same majority yielded to appeals to avoid shaking of hands and hugging of others. Unfortunately, a significant number of Nigerians as indicated in the study could not stay at home under a lockdown directive. This is obviously because of the unavoidable necessity to go out in search of food and basic needs to survive the lockdown. There were however several insinuations from different quarters, explaining why Nigerians were not complying with the Covid-19 protocols but the newspaper columnists felt saddled with the duties to offer their opinions.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is premised on two theories: The Agenda Setting Theory and The Media Framing Theory. The Agenda Setting idea, according to Iyorza and Agara (2020) was developed by Maxwell Comb and Donald Shaw in 1972 as a theory states that the media determines the importance placed upon particular issues”. According to the theory, Larson (1992) stresses further that the public agenda – the kinds of issues people discuss, think and worry about - is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media choose to publicize. As the theorists put it, mass media do not tell us what to think; they tell us what to think about.

The Media Framing Theory was first put forth by Erving Goffman in 1974 under the title of “Frame Analysis”. Scheufele (1999) states that the Media Framing Theory is premised on the assumption that the media channels such as radio, television and newspapers beam their focus on societal issues and events and place them within a field of meaning. Under the media framing theory, the media presenters, producers or writers highlight the issues and make sense of events for the audience. Fundamentally, the theory believes that the media play
important roles in helping the audience to regulate, accept or form negative or positive perceptions about an event. Framing of the narrative on Covid-19 lockdown has the capacity to address the preconceptions of the people and how they should perceive the issue. The framed narrative under this theory will present the pros and cons from the columnists’ perspectives.

Methodology

This paper adopted the explorative design which involves conducting “a research problem when there are few or no earlier studies to refer to or rely upon to predict an outcome” (Streb, 2010), using the qualitative research method; “a method that involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g. text, video or audio) to understand concepts, opinions or experiences and to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research” (Bhandari, 2020). Specifically, the study used thematic analysis to review and interpret patterns and themes of the selected newspaper columns and to explore how newspaper columnists’ opinions on media coverage of the lockdown period, how the columnists presented their opinions and how they framed opinions on the way the Nigerian government handled the lives of their citizens during the lockdown as these opinions are likely to shape the thinking patterns of people in the society. The multi-stage sampling method was adopted. Out of a population of forty-six (46) online versions of Nigerian newspapers according to Fung (2020), the study selected six (6), representing 13% of the total number. The selection was done using the simple random technique where each medium was selected without consideration of any factor and convenience sampling technique where selection was made based on the availability of papers that carried opinions on the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria. The study further selected six (6) columns by columnists on Covid-19 and lockdown in Nigeria. The views of the columnists were first presented then a critical review and analysis was done based on the personally expressed perspectives, views or opinions of the columnists on the media coverage of Covid-19 in Nigeria, the effects of the lockdown in Nigeria and Nigeria’s preparedness and efforts to contain the pandemic. The review of each variable was based on at least two newspaper columnists’ opinions.

Thematic Presentation of Selected Newspaper Columnists’ Discourse on Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

Discourse on Media Coverage

Newspaper columnists opine that great challenges accompanied the media coverage of the Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria. Mbamalu’s (2020) opinion posits that the Nigerian media was not allowed easy access to information about Covid-19 in Nigeria and claims that isolation centres were prohibited regions heavily guarded by security to prevent anyone access, not even journalists, except those media houses highly connected to the government (Mbamalu 2020). This implies that information was shrouded in secrecy and the Federal Government of Nigeria lacked transparency in divulging information about public office holders who were infected with the disease and how they were to receive treatment as it was done developed countries were leaders of the nation who contracted the virus were in the news.

This suggests that preference for coverage of Covid-19 isolation centres was accorded some media organizations against others, implying failure in fairness. Consequently, images of patients who were diagnosed with the virus could not be shown on television. The study also indicated difficulty in coverage of Covid-19, citing policy to check stigmatization, refusal of infected patients to speak to the journalists, restrictive access to patients receiving treatment and the government agencies’ conservativeness and uncooperativeness in furnishing journalists with adequate information.
Obi’s (2020) opinion held that the media made some concerted efforts to keep Nigerians abreast of information on Covid-19 during the lockdown but expressed his view that the efforts of the media were inadequate. Specifically:

Media (needs) to dig deep and interrogate certain actions or inactions (that explain) slow progress in the pandemic which has tested national systems including the health sector and Nigeria’s preparedness to such sudden developments (Obi, 2020, 20).

Obi’s (2020) opinion survey also indicated that fake news, inaccurate Covid-19 myths and under-reporting of drugs used to treat the recovered patients are strong factors that have challenged media audiences’ and Nigerians’ belief in the reality of the existence of Covid-19 as campaigned by most media organizations in their practice of social responsibility. In addition, the lack of depth in reports about Covid-19 could be attributed to health reporters’ alienation from patients or care-givers for the fact that the pandemic is a delicate one and easy to contract.

In another dimension, Obi (2020) posited that the traditional media (broadcast and print), amidst lack of depth in the Covid-19 reports as stated earlier, were more trustworthy sources of information than the social media. Government agency and Non-Governmental Organizations’ websites such as Nigeria Centre for Disease Control’s and World Health Organization’s websites were regarded as trustworthy. Amidst the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, companies leveraged on the increase in media coverage and Covid-19 prevention campaigns to promote their brands, tying the media activity to Covid-19 campaigns. The commercials on Dettol and Hypo on Nigerian televisions are good examples.

**Discourse on Effects of Covid-19 Lockdown on Nigerians**

From few surveys conducted, another columnist, Arjiromanus (2020) opined that the experiences of Nigerians on the effects of the lockdown were both positive and negative. Positively more Nigerian youths were opportune to discover and utilize their talents, especially for the purpose of maximizing profit legitimately through the use of digital technology. Arjiromanus writes:

Some youths have exhibited high level of intelligence; we shouldn’t allow them go to waste. This is the time to harvest those intellectuals and make good use of them. We must adopt ways of digitalizing our businesses… (Arjiromanus, 2020).

Indeed, the lockdown period caused many young persons to rediscover themselves; an opportunity that for self-development. Some spent more time to improve on their sewing skills while others got trained in various disciplines. Self-discovery and development were some of the benefits of some Nigerian citizens during the lockdown. Arjiromanus also opines:

I’ve been discovering new things about myself. First, I’m getting to learn me. Now I know I can survive indoors, being a company to myself and learning about the world from my comfort. I’m also trying out some online courses and have been certified in one so far, still on others (Arjiromanus, 2020).

Also the Nigerian elites experienced a shift in their life styles during the lockdown in Nigeria. Arjiromanus (2020) was of the opinion that Nigerian politicians adopted moderation in lifestyles and exhibited compassion on the people they led. To say that the elite Nigerians were generous to the less privilege is an opinion that has been tested by other studies on lockdown that showed that most poor Nigerians were not catered for
during the lockdown in the country. From his opinion, the columnist rightly observed the exposure of the government’s failure in the provision of health care and stressed the need for a renewed commitment of the federal and state governments “to build and develop the health, social and economic sectors of the country.” Also, the positive assertion that the lockdown experience witnessed cooperation among lines of class, ethnicity, religion and ideology in Nigeria can be said to be partly true as both Muslims and Christians were collectively calling for prayers to end the pandemic while relative peace ensued among ethnic groups that were hitherto engaged in some forms of communal clashes.

On a negative note, Okunfolami (2020) posited that Nigeria ignored the pressing economic issues as well as the existence of other diseases such as Lassa fever, hepatitis, HIV and malaria that are caused by neglect of environmental factors. Nigeria rather channeled all her energies on Covid-19 and lockdown without recourse to tackling pressing issues at the same time. The argument was that the government neglected attention to other diseases within the environment that may kill Nigerians faster than the Covid-19. Okunfolami (2020) expressed fears that the Covid-19 will linger for some time in Nigeria while transmission or infection cases will remain on a steady rise as long as environmental wastes are not evacuated by the government, necessary medical facilities are not provided and water is not running from the taps that government directs her citizens to wash their hands regularly. This opinion is however challenged by a study of Covid-19 in Nigeria as shown on table I above, which indicates that despite the absence of running water to most households in Nigeria, majority of the citizens were still washing their hands from some water they were able to provide.

Okunfolami (2020) also noted that the lockdown in Nigeria, which of course has prevented farmers from going to their farms, will pave way for another pandemic – “Hunger 20” – in a very short time. This may kill Nigerians faster than the Covid-19. In another development, the lockdown exposed most law enforcement agents’ lack of training in handling civilians as cases of harassments of some persons on essential duties were high. Again, while the lockdown lasted, insecurity, kidnapping and armed robbery cases were highly recorded as perpetrators became intensely hungry in daring to use the opportunities of poor security to invade homes where many were already bored.

**Discourse on Nigeria’s efforts at addressing lockdown issues**

The world’s lockdown story differs from country to country. In Nigeria, a selection and marriage of two opinions as discussed below presents a summary of Nigeria’s lockdown. An opinion columnnist, Igwe (2020), summarily stated that Nigeria lacked a coordinated and comprehensive strategy to deal with economic consequences, food needs, health emergency needs, support for livelihoods and safety nets to prepare the ground for economic recovery during and after the lockdown. To him, Nigeria’s lockdown efforts were an emulation of global practices, including the stay-at-home order, which was a coordinated effort to contain the novel corona virus. Igwe (2020) also argues that whereas, the western approach to the lockdown provided palliative measures to citizens of Europe and America, the situation was different in Nigeria, a country with low-income status, extreme high poverty level and a highly dependent population on daily wages in the informal sector of the economy.

Also, columnists’ reflections on the effects of the lockdown in Nigeria showed that the country’s decision to shut down her economy like others in advanced country was hasty with the expected consequences considering the nation’s state of poverty. Describing Nigeria as the “poverty capital of the world by overtaking India”, Igwe posits:
Since the lockdown, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions have remained closed and could not migrate to online since more than half of the population lived in rural areas with no access to electricity and internet services. Many non-essential services (were) banned from operating. Even businesses considered essential to remain open (ran) out of supplies due to shortages in production and challenges in the global supply chain due to closures of national borders in response to the pandemic (Igwe, 2020).

In addition, the appeal for social distancing and self-isolation in a typical Nigerian crowded living environment, town planning and the crowded open market condition was impossible. The palliative measures earmarked for the “poorest of the poor” in Nigeria was hardly a reality. The government failed to add new or improve on her existing health facilities; citizens provided their medical care and paid for online education of their children (for those who could afford the bills for few online classes) in most cases. The government also failed to ensure provision of steady electricity and water and rather contemplated a hike in electricity bills when other world economies were contemplating reduction in prices of goods and services.

Igwe (2020) recounts that amidst struggles for payment of social services without much assistance from the government, several governments were busy punishing citizens for flaunting government orders or rolling out draconian laws and measures, welding the big stick, spitting brimstone and fire “when their citizens were wallowing in agony of hunger, disease, joblessness, poverty and lack of hope.” Consequently, Igwe also states:

> The lockdown conditions only exacerbated the ‘problem such as high share of working poor, high rate of vulnerable workers, lack of basic healthcare and high illiteracy in the country…. The lockdown has unleashed widespread social insecurity, hunger, political corruption, economic joblessness and profound economic uncertainty (Igwe, 2020).

The growing hardship encountered during the lockdown as reported by Igwe (2020) led to pockets of protests from workers in the private sector of the economy as well as unemployed groups in some parts of the country, forcing the government to begin easing the lockdown on the movement of people to avoid national social unrest amidst the daily rising cases of the Covid-19 at the time. Another columnist, Aderibigbe (2020) corroborated that the unbearable conditions of Nigeria’s rising cases of Covid-19 was responsible for the futility of the lockdown extensions directed by President Muhammadu Buhari in Lagos, Ogun and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. The restriction order was obeyed more in breach. Most citizens defied the ban on inter-state travel and made their journeys in the dead of the night. There were pockets of restlessness across the country and cases of increased violence were already recorded in some states, such as in Lagos, which recorded the resurgence of the “One Million Boys”, a band of hoodlums who visited several communities with violence.

Results

The following findings can be drawn from the above review:

i. Newspaper columnists and their opinions on the media coverage of the Covid-19 lockdown showed made the members of the public to believe that the Nigerian Government was not fair to some media organization in terms of coverage of the Covid-19 lockdown, implying that the era of regulating media and determining what they should report or not is still with us in the country.
ii. The Federal Government of Nigeria may be obeying the health policy of secrecy of information but the columnists’ opinion imply that hiding the identity of public government officials who contracted the virus was a violation of transparency on the part of the Nigerian government.

iii. Columnists’ presentation of opinions was, as usual, subjective but illogical and unbalanced as they mostly appeared to be rather negatively critical and one-sided against the Federal Government’s efforts at providing palliatives to her citizens. Their opinions sold to the Nigerian public the view that the lockdown period in the country was capable of leading the nation to a period of famine or hunger as most farmers were not even allowed to go to farm; that more diseases or cases of Hepatitis, Malaria and Lassa fever were likely to spring up as the nation channelled its energies to fighting the spread of Covid-19 at the expense of ignoring other diseases.

iv. Columnists made Nigerians and readers all over the world to believe that Nigeria was doing little or nothing in cushioning the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown because palliatives were not served to the people, most persons lost their jobs without the government’s intervention while most businesses crumbled without any government assistance.

Discussion/Critique of the Selected Newspaper Columnists

First, the newspaper columnists’ opinion that Nigerian journalists or reporters (most of them) were denied access to cover stories from the governments’ ‘hugely invested’ isolation centres in Nigeria indicates that the Nigerian Government hid some facts from her citizens. The permission of some reporters who worked with some reputable media organizations without any restriction or insistence on wearing Personal Protection Kits was an unfair treatment to journalists and obviously led to under-reporting of Covid-19 in a nation where information on the pandemic in the areas of medication for patients, challenges of medical personnel and the availability of medical facilities to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria was scanty.

Also on coverage, the Federal Government was accused by newspaper columnists for keeping health information away from Nigerians. On a critical note, this seems to be a political practice that dates back to many years since the country’s independence. Mbamalu, a columnist, specifically laments the secrecy theory thus:

By implication, Nigeria’s secrecy about Covid-19 is not as much a health issue as it is a political issue rooted in a culture of lack of transparency going back many years since independence. It is a practice in politics of health secrecy. Top among health-related political secrets in Nigeria in recent memory are the ailment and death of Musa Yar’Adua, former president of Nigeria (November 2009-May 2010); the 51-day and 103-day London treatments of President Muhammadu Buhari (March to August 2017) and former President Jonathan’s stomach pain (November, 2013) (Mbamalu, 2020).

The issue of concealing information accruable to the citizens of Nigeria can be corroborated observably during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The Federal Government’s Presidential Task Force (PTF) on Covid-19 in the early months of the lockdown in 2020 in Nigeria, during one of the daily routine briefings, had refused to answer questions and warned journalists against asking further questions on the whereabouts of the Chinese Medical Team who were imported into the country to assist in the fight against Covid-19. In fact, a member of the PTF warned repeatedly that no question on the whereabouts of the Chinese medical team will be entertained. The journalist’s curiosity was based on Nigerians’ earlier concerns, rejection and questions on the need for the
foreign medical team when Nigerian medical practitioners were available for the job. Mbamalu’s column therefore authenticated the fact that health information was concealed during the lockdown.

The above opinion of the newspaper columnists on the coverage of the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria was quite in order. However, the columnists did not research to find out why some journalists were denied access to the isolation centres and why perhaps the Federal Government of Nigeria was unwilling to give out information about prominent Nigerians who were infected with Covid-19. It is the right of the citizens to know the state of health of their public office holders and their capacity to govern. It is also ethical to control traffic of persons who should have access to the isolation centres who may not have adequate protection kits for every journalist who comes in to cover a story.

However, selling an opinion to the public in the market place of ideas goes beyond mere reporting; it demands research and logical presentation of ideas and facts. Thus the columnists should have done a great deal of research to justify certain objections to journalists’ access to the isolation centres and the Covid-19 Patients. By forming opinions based on their mere observation of the experiences of the journalists’ reports, the newspaper columnists were not clinical in presenting their views to the newspaper audience. Secondly, from the review of columnists’ muses on the experiences of Nigerians as effects of the lockdown in the country, the Nigerian newspaper columnists saw the lockdown period as an opened window for self-development among many Nigerian youths as they undertook online courses and learnt new skills. The period also appeared to have united Nigerians more than ever as citizens exchanged messages caring to find out about the health of one another while Nigerian politicians moderated their lifestyles and became quite frugal in spending, preaching the need for collective efforts to fight against the spread of Corona Virus in Nigeria.

The newspaper columnists however failed to identify the percentage of young persons who undertook to self-development. Being an opinion, the newspaper columnists’ view that young Nigerians were engaged in self-development during the lockdown may send out an impression to the media audience even within the international community that these youths were really hard working. The truth is that the lockdown period in the country was greeted with harder times characterized by hunger and idleness without distribution of palliatives as indicated above.

Money was not forthcoming and a greater majority of Nigerians did not have the financial strength to purchase data to go online and even register for courses which were perhaps not free. In addition, the moderation of lifestyles among the rich in Nigeria as claimed by the newspaper columnists could be a misconception as most very rich Nigerians at the point could be playing low owing to the perceived hardship of the future as no one knew when the lockdown was going to be over. Thus, the conclusions of some newspaper columnists were quite hasty without adequate substance.

Thirdly, the newspaper columnists accused the Federal Government of Nigeria’s failure, through her health agencies, to disclose detailed and vital information about Covid-19 to Nigerians, which created a wide information gap. Newspaper columnists opined that citizen journalists consequently seized the social media platforms and circulated what the Federal Government called “fake news” and “myths” about Covid-19. Among the fake news in Nigeria were circulated information that Covid-19 was not real; the whole story was the Federal Government’s plan to attract sympathy funds from the international community and well-meaning individuals.

Newspaper columnists also insinuated that the Nigerian Federal Government’s efforts to correct the devastating impact of fake news on promoting the reality of Covid-19 through the main stream media channels
(radio, television, billboards) became futile as most Nigerians defied the lockdown and went about their businesses giving little or no attention to the safety tips from the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC); safety tips such as maintaining social distance, wearing of facemask and staying at home orders were grossly violated. Also, as in most parts of the world, Nigeria ignored campaigns against other diseases such as Lassa fever and Malaria which were more deadly than Covid-19 and focused only on preventing the spread of the novel corona virus disease.

The above views of the newspaper columnists are substantially justified but the opinion writers failed to come out with possible reasons why the Federal Government of Nigeria would hoard information on the Covid-19. There have been suspicions in some quarters in Nigeria that the Federal Government acted in such a manner as to draw the financial sympathy of the international community. Thus newspaper columnists gave readers a reason to believe that they (newspaper columnists) may be compromising the virtue of integrity in reporting. Opinion writers in this sense also failed to be logical and bold in the anticipated presentation of their views in such a constructive and convincing manner.

Finally, newspaper columnists were of the view that Nigerian authorities employed measures such as restriction of movements of people (even to farms), shutting down of schools and places of worship and banning public gatherings as done in other parts of the world without supporting their citizens with adequate palliatives and without envisaging severe hunger in the land in the near future as efforts towards tackling the challenges of lockdown in Nigeria. Truly, the lockdown period in Nigeria also witnessed a surge in insecurity, including cases of rape, kidnapping, armed robbery/ banditry and more. Nigerian’s efforts at fighting against the spread of Covid-19 included a lockdown strategy patterned after the style adopted by advanced countries of Europe and America where palliatives were adequately distributed to citizens in cash and kind.

However the newspaper columnists failed to observe that Nigeria’s lockdown strategy to cushion the harsh effects of Covid-19 lockdown denied Nigerians the required palliatives from government as they failed to reach the poorest of the poor as planned and indicated in the review of literature. The columnists were less sympathetic as only few of them could acknowledge that proprietors of private businesses suffered more losses without receiving any support from the Federal Government. Some columnists however observed rightly that the Nigerian Government failed to provide the enabling environment for her population of more than 200 million people to wash their hands regularly with soap, keep physical distance and stay at home. Little wonder why the Federal Government campaigns failed as citizens could not stay at home but moved out regularly in the quest to survive. The newspaper columnists could not point out that the Federal Government’s plan to shut down schools and encourage online learning was ill-conceived as it failed to recognize that the majority of Nigerians are the rural poor who have no access to electricity, neither the financial capacity to afford the technology to enable them participate in the Government’s advocated learning.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the media discourse on lockdown during the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria as mulled by newspaper columnists, this paper concludes that the lockdown was a blessing in disguise for Nigerians but more of a nightmare in various dimensions. Most newspaper columnists were not detailed, descriptive and logical in presenting their opinions on the manner in which information distribution was managed and censored, the effects of the lockdown period on Nigerians and the nature of the Federal Government’s intervention to the plight of
Nigerians during the Covid-19 lockdown. Media coverage of the pandemic was epileptic without necessary details to the citizens of Nigeria during the lockdown and there was a preferential treatment of journalists over others but the newspaper columnists did not tell their audience why.

Newspaper columnists were positively emphatic on the benefit of the lockdown period to Nigerians but the Federal Governments’ poor approach to the plight of Nigerians as postulated by the columnist shows the country did little or nothing to ameliorate the conditions of her citizens. However, due to the negligence of some newspaper columnists’ opinions on some very critical concerns, Nigerian and international readers of columnists’ opinion are bound to be misguided and deprived of some critical reasons for certain actions of government and individuals.

This paper therefore recommends that newspaper columnists should be more thorough, balanced and logical in the presentation of their opinions on the pages of newspaper in order not to shortchange the ever increasing knowledge-seeking local, national and international readers. Newspaper columnists without requisite background in the art of writing opinions to newspapers should seek training and retraining from online schools in order to improve on their skills for writing for the newspaper audience. The Federal Government should be proactive and should take media writers’ opinions seriously; opinions that are logically presented for solutions to health issues. Most of the opinions come from reputable columnists whose ideas can be helpful for solving health problems in Nigeria. Finally, the mainstream media should take up more aggressive campaigns against fake news on social media. Fake news challenges the people from believing in the reality of diseases such as the Covid-19.

References


