ISSN 2055-0286
Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal; Vol. 13 No. 03 (2026) (253-275)
https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.1303.20145

# Exploring Media Attention Toward Pandemics and Health Crisis in Cameroon: A Comparative Content Analysis of Cameroon Tribune, The Guardian Post, and Le Jour Newspapers Coverage of COVID-19

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**Abstract**: The purpose of this study was to examine which Cameroon newspaper (Cameroon Tribune, The Guardian Post, and Le Jour) paid more attention in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic. A quantitative content analysis was used to examine the content of these newspapers with the agenda-setting theory as a theoretical guide. The findings reveal that out of a total of 2575 stories on COVID-19, Cameroon Tribune reported 49.4%, as opposed to 29.2% and 21.4% for The Guardian Post and Le Jour newspapers, respectively. However, The Guardian Post gave more prominence and visibility to the pandemic by publishing more stories on premium pages (front pages and pages 2 & 3) and using more banner headlines. It was also noticed that the newspapers carried fewer in-depth reports. A greater proportion (39.6%, 29.9% and 20.5%) of COVID-19 mentions were just a ¼ page, half page and less than ¼ page, respectively. Generally, the newspapers played their social responsibility role by frequently mentioning the pandemic in their different editions, thereby creating awareness of the existence of this health pandemic. However, it is recommended that the media should, in future, not only focus on mentioning health pandemics in their reports but should give them more prominence and visibility by placing them on the front pages and using banner headlines to catch readers' attention. Similarly, the media should consider giving more in-depth coverage on health pandemics like COVID-19. Less in-depth stories are often scanty and lack scientific details.

**Keywords:** Media attention, COVID-19, Pandemic, Newspaper coverage, Health crisis

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars like Laing (2011), Klemm, Das and Hartmann (2016), and Pieri (2019) have recognised the role played by the news media during national security and health emergencies. There is a common agreement in Coleman, Thorson and Wilkins (2011), Martinson and Hindman (2005) and Ndonko and Genna (2024) that the media serve as an important source of health-related information. They also maintained that the media is a very influential tool in shaping the way people think about and discuss health issues. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic can be described as one of those health emergencies that sent the entire world into panic as the virus spread rapidly across the globe within a very short time, claiming lives and raising many concerns and speculations. It took just a

few days after the first case of COVID-19 in Africa was reported in Egypt on the 14th of February 2020 for the World Health Organisation (WHO) to declare the virus had affected a total of 47 African countries. WHO (2021) reported that 77,087 deaths were recorded as of the 27th of March 2021.

There were early predictions that Africa would be worst hit by this pandemic, considering the continent's overstrained and weak health systems, inadequate financing of health care, paucity in human resources, and challenges posed by existing endemic diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria (Maeda & Nkengasong, 2021). According to this prediction, there were expecting about 70 million Africans would be infected and 3 million would die during the COVID-19 pandemic. The population was thrown into an ocean of unverified information during the pandemic, as, more often than not, little or no official information was available at the beginning of this health emergency. Most of the information that was available was a proliferation of rumours, falsehoods, and half-truths on social media. This was creating fear and panic among citizens. Additionally, conspiracy theories were particularly propagated on social media. Papakyriakopoulos, Serrano and Hegelich (2020) found that alternative sources, such as social media ecosystems, generated more stories reinforcing these conspiracy theories than mainstream sources like newspapers, radio and television.

It is worth mentioning that the mainstream media, governments and people around the world might have paid less attention to this disease when it was initially announced in Wuhan City in the Hubei Province of China. They considered it a problem in "faraway China", probably because of poor communication. In addition to psychological distress and resource shortages, Du, You, Zhou, Wang, Xu, Li, et al. (2021) confirmed that difficulty in communication and coordination were serious problems faced by health personnel in the prevention and control of COVID-19 at its early stages.

Just like other countries, Cameroon was not left out as the world suddenly found itself amid a rapidly spreading pandemic that it had not prepared for. On the 18th of May 2020, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) released a report detailing the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cameroon. The report stated that the country confirmed the first case of this pandemic on the 5th of March 2020. According to this report, the Cameroonian authorities placed the country on maximum alert and activated a contingency plan at emergency level two on the 17th of March 2020. Mbah et al. (2023) affirmed that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led Cameroon's government to implement public health measures aimed at preventing its spread.

Some of the measures the Cameroon government took, as stated in OCHA (2020), included: the closing of Cameroon's land, air and sea borders; the closing of schools; and the closing of restaurants, bars and entertainment spots after 18:00 hours to control the spread by the 18th of March 2020. The government of Cameroon went further to reinforce these measures on the 13th of April, the same year, with new ones, including the compulsory wearing of masks in public spaces, the adoption of locally manufactured chloroquine treatment, and the opening of specialised testing centres in all ten regions. However, though the epidemic continued to progress with confirmed community transmissions, the government later lifted some of the measures on the 30th of April 2020 after having carried out an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the national economy. Confronted with a health crisis like the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, the news media coverage can communicate risks to readers and shape public perceptions by constantly mentioning the situation in its

content. The reports of the news media can also stimulate policy responses depending on the attention and frames it gives to the situation.

Understanding media coverage of COVID-19 is primordial to deciphering the role the media plays in influencing public discourse and action during health crises. This paper principally monitors the content of three major Cameroonian newspapers, namely, Cameroon Tribune (state-owned bilingual), The Guardian Post (privately owned English) and Le Jour (privately owned French), which are all dailies, to examine the extent of attention they gave in reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. By implication, it seeks to examine the visibility these newspapers gave to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theoretical assumption of this study is that the more exposure the media gave to the COVID-19 pandemic, the more the government and policymakers became concerned and took action. At the same time, the more people became aware of the risks posed by the pandemic through media exposure, the more they adopted safety measures recommended by the government. Guided by the agenda-setting theory, this study examines the mentions (frequencies), page placements (front page, pages 2 and 3, centre spread, inside pages, etc.), story lengths (more than full page, full page, half page, quarter page, etc.), headline types (banner headline, etc.), story formats (editorial, feature, news, etc.), etc., and determines which of the newspapers gave more visibility to this health pandemic in Cameroon.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A Reflection on Mass Media and Health Reporting

The mass media, be it conventional or social media, is known for its power in influencing human behaviour (Kaur, 2024, Guinote et al., 2025). Solving some health problems requires that policymakers take actions towards resolving such problems, and on the other hand, the population adjusts their behaviours to suit health policies recommended by policymakers. According to Peng and Tang (2010), the mass media play an important role in disseminating health-related information and facilitating health-related behavioural changes.

In the same vein, Walsh-Chiders (1994) stated that the mass media can be a powerful tool for fixing health problems worldwide by setting the agenda to influence health policy. The media is used to achieve this by providing information and models that stimulate health-related attitudes and, and behaviour changes that could either be positive or negative (Walsh-Childers & Brown, 2002). Such information contributes to the advancement of health via changing customs and attitudes, increasing knowledge, raising confidence and discussions and in so doing, encourages healthier practices and transparency around health delivery services and policies.

Considering that health crisis are periods when misleading information is easily disseminated, Ouchene, Boussalah and Ziane (2024) maintained that the media becomes a fundamental pillar in raising awareness on the health issue by providing information, education, advocacy and promoting positive changes in the health behaviour of individuals and communities towards taking positive steps to improve their health. Such information includes messages to create awareness on how to prevent the disease, treatment methods and the latest research and developments in the medical field.

Kenterelidou (2012) argued that in addition to be the main channel for transmitting public health information, the news media is also the most popular, convenient and consistent source. For these reasons, a good number of people rely on the news to get health information. This media dependency is said to have limited the interaction between health workers and the public during periods of crises (Schwitzer et al., 2005). Despite the increasing dependence of the population on the media for public health information, scholars have recognised some limitations in the capacity of the media to effectively communicate on public health information. Hoffman and Justicz (2016) found that some news media demonstrate an inadequate scientific quality in their content when reporting past pandemics. Thereby, showing a limitation in their capacity to disseminate public health guidance and to coordinate responses effectively.

Hoffman and Justicz (2016) further argued that disseminating low-quality scientific reporting of pandemics may exaggerate or play down the risks of a disease or the efficacy of protective measures needed to curb its spread. By implication, such reporting may constrain the feasibility or effectiveness of options for policymakers directing government actions, miss opportunities to inform individuals making health decisions, and increase the exposure of health professionals to disease. Laing (2011) and Klemm et al. (2016) explained that it can both aggravate disease outcomes and generate unnecessary fear, in combination with other factors influencing perceptions among the public.

The ability of the media in Africa to cover and report on health issues is even more challenging. Wollnik (2022) noted that it is only in the last 10 to 20 years that the media in Africa started promoting specialised news desks and journalistic healthcare reporting training. Lack of training of journalists on health reporting may cause them to produce less accurate or less in-depth reports on a health issue. In the same way, without sufficient resources, the journalists may not carry out enough research or contact different medical experts in that field to gather facts. Hence, they may end up quickly producing a scanty or and an unverified report on health issues.

Obeng-Quaidoo (1988) also stipulated that the African media pay less attention to health issues in favour of politics. He suggested that the root cause of this disregard of health issues in African media is a function of the colonial heritage of this continent that built journalism practice against a political background. As a result, this has made health journalism very unpopular in this part of the world. Obeng-Quaidoo (1988) added that the way journalists in Africa approach health issues is compounded by their lack of specialisation on this beat. Consequently, they unquestioningly report what health and government officials tell them without conducting any independent research and analysis into the health issue they are covering.

The challenges that may prevent the media from covering health issues cannot be exhausted in this paper. However, Ngange, Moki and Matute (2025) found that journalists are generally confronted with challenges such as difficulties accessing information, threats and intimidation, lack of resources and financial difficulties and suffer from punitive transfer and censorship when they report on controversial issues like corruption.

Health issues are sometimes surrounded by controversies. As stated in a report by Reporters Without Borders (2020), media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic had consequences for press freedom. Reporters Without Borders, in collaboration with Cartooning for Peace, conducted a study that revealed the effect the outbreak of COVID-19

had on press freedom in Africa. According to this report, there was a sharp rise in abuses against journalists in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Nigeria, Rwanda, Eswatini, amongst others. Some were wounded, harassed, arrested and imprisoned by security forces whilst doing coverages on lockdowns and government actions on the health crisis.

Some 23 journalists were assaulted in sub-Saharan Africa, with some 31 arbitrarily arrested between the 15th of March and the 15th of May 2022 while reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 109 infringements on press freedom were recorded, with Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Uganda alone accounting for 38% of the registered violations (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). This report exposes challenges faced by health journalists in Africa in their coverage of the pandemic: brutality towards journalists, financial woes, lack of transparency and repressive legislation, etc., can all, in one way or another, influence the attention journalists or the media can pay in reporting health issues and consequently, the volume of COVID-19 news published.

**Understanding News Worthiness and Media Agenda**

Generally, the media adopts different strategies to ensure that the audience comes in contact with the news stories they consider to be the most important. Early scholars on agenda setting, McCombs and Shaw (1972), noted that editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important role in shaping political reality by choosing how to display news. They claimed that readers do not only learn about a given issue reported on the media, but that the importance they attach to that information is determined by the amount of information on that issue in a news story and where it is positioned.

Definitely, the lead and other front-page stories are considered more prominent than those in other pages (inside, centre spread and back pages). Readers will often find the news-worthy events located on a newspaper's front page. McQuail (2010), Singer (2001) and Reisner (1992) all agreed that this first page is the most prized. Therefore, editors devote much energy into determining which highlights of the day's most critical story should be published on this page to grab the attention of readers. Also, the number of times stories appear in the newspapers relating to an issue and the length of such stories determine the prominence given to the issue (Moki, 2020).

It is also disclosed in Bedřichová (2006) that newspapers design their headlines and subheadlines using various sizes and typefaces and also, by carefully choosing different colours to achieve the goal of attracting readers to read a story. Considering that one of the functions of the front-page headlines is to lure the looker into becoming a reader, Bedřichová (2006) maintained that newspapers' efforts to succeed in drawing the attention of readers are still more evident, compared to headlines placed on the inside pages of the newspaper. In a single phrase, McCombs and Shaw (1972; 177) stated that "the mass media force attention to certain issues."

Looking at the way newspapers are displayed in the news stand, it can be observed that the eyes of persons passing by can easily come in contact with stories placed on the front pages more than those covered in the inside pages. Consequently, authors have argued that the importance of information published in newspapers can be determined based on the pages on which it is placed. According to Bedřichová (2006), there is a direct impact

between the front-page headlines and the daily circulation of newspapers. Radu and Banjac (2012) confirmed this by stating that the position of a story in the newspaper is an indicator of the importance that the newspaper ascribes to that issue. Radu and Banjac (2012) further identified the analyses and editorial pages as two other positions in the newspaper where stories that publishers attach importance to are published.

It is found in existing literature that there is a relationship between stories published on the front page of newspapers and the agenda setting by the media. The newspaper sets its agenda through the selection of a set of topics or issues that it deems most important and presents them on the front page using carefully crafted headlines. Kim and Chung (2017) compared the anatomy of front pages in The New York Times and other U.S. major metropolitan newspapers to garner readers' attention. It was revealed that various newspapers use different designs and sizes to determine which news story is prioritised.

The newspaper's agenda is found in the set of topics and issues that it deems most important, which are prominently presented on the front page through carefully selected headlines, photographs, and stories. Anita and Krishna (2018) revealed that the information published on the front page of newspapers not only significantly contributes to attracting the attention of readers but also sets the agenda for the public. Practically, the media sets the agenda by prioritising or concentrating on particular issues to report on frequently on their front pages. This practice, which influences what the public concentrates on or discusses, is known as agenda-setting. In another explanation, Strömbäck and Kiousis (2010) revealed that, to set an agenda, the media specifically pushes an issue on the agenda by increasing its attention while it simultaneously drops concern for competing issues. They described this decline in issue competition as one of the factors that may create a conducive environment for some issues to become salient and not others.

Even studies related to the placement of advertisements in newspapers have also established that advertisements placed on the front page, editorial pages and on the right pages result in higher exposure and more attention. In terms of ranking, Neijens and Marijntje Stuurman (2006) found that advertisements on the newspaper front page reached the highest compared to those in other pages. It is definitely costlier to place an advertisement on the front page of a newspaper as compared to other pages.

**How the Mass Media Reported on COVID-19: An Empirical Review**

Much research has been done on media coverage of health issues, especially the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western world and other countries in Africa. In our search for empirical evidence on how the media have reported this pandemic across the globe, we found almost a negligible number of publications citing Cameroon. This empirical review focuses on media coverage of COVID-19, also known as the “novel coronavirus”, in terms of the attention and salience it portrayed quantitatively.

To start with, Su et al. (2021) researched the mental health consequences of COVID-19 media coverage to identify whether traditional and social media reports on COVID-19 fuelled infodemics and the effect on mental health. A content analysis of some 38 million media reports was done from January 1 to May 25, 2020. This study revealed that an enormous 84% of misinformation was disseminated that reached the public. This is reported to have exposed the public to misinformation and conspiracies that led to severe health

challenges and dire economic consequences. It was also discovered that the most problematic type of media coverage on COVID-19 involves content that is “false and dishonest”. The authors argue that mainstream media was partisan to “baseless and sensational news” via the use of narratives like “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus”. These narratives led to the spread of fake news and a socially irresponsible public who played with the severity of the crisis, thereby bringing unending catastrophic human and economic consequences onto the globe.

Still within the year 2020, another study that quantified online news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was published. In that study, Krawczyk et al. (2020) analysed some 12 million news articles from the front pages of 172 major online news sources of 11 countries (UK, France, and the US inclusive). They found that pandemic coverage accounted for approximately 25% of all front-page online news articles between January and October 2020. Sentiment analysis revealed that, in general, COVID-19 coverage could not be classified as negative, given the wide, heterogeneous coverage of the pandemic. As opposed to other languages like French, it was established that out of the 16% of COVID-19 heterogeneous health coverage, 4% of all English articles could be classified as “highly negatively polarised, citing issues such as death, fear or crisis”. Finally, the investigation revealed an information overload on pandemic reporting, which presents a risk to public communication and response to health protocols.

In another study, Mach et al. (2021) dissected newspapers' coverage of COVID-19 from March 1, 2020, when the disease was declared a global pandemic by the WHO, to August 15, 2020. This study projected that reporting had moderate scientific quality and low sensationalism across 1331 sampled articles in the twelve newspapers sampled from Canada, the USA and the U.K. Results showed that populist-right registered the lowest scientific research quality in reporting, combined with low sensationalism in “some” cases. On the other hand, the political left US newspapers (Washington Post and New York Times) had more in-depth and scientifically savvy reports. They focused on policy failures, misinformation and risks of the disease. This was not the case with the political right US papers.

Apuke and Omar (2021) also took an interest in examining television news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. They adopted a sequential mixed-method by conducting a content analysis of a privately-owned TV called African Independent Television (AIT), and a government-owned TV called Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). They later carried out telephone interviews with (n = 30) selected participants from the six geopolitical zones in the country. This second method was aimed at understanding the public’s view regarding the coverage of the pandemic and its influence on them. They found that out of a total of 422 stories covered on COVID-19, more were focused on Nigeria (n = 295) compared with stories that focused on other countries (n = 127).

The data in the above study revealed that a majority (56.7%) of the stories were found on the private media, while 43.3% were on the government media. The statistical result, $x2(1) = 21.373$, $p < .001$, established that the difference was statistically significant between these two media. Also, in terms of the duration of the stories, it was found that a majority (68.6%) of the stories on COVID-19 that were telecasted for 61 seconds and above were on the private media, while the private media also had more COVID-19 stories on its headline (82%) than the government media (55%). This study is a good example that aligns

with the objective of the current study, as it compares the attention various media gave to the pandemic.

Alawode and Okoji (2022) also took an interest in examining how the Nigerian online newspaper covered the coronavirus pandemic. They aimed to understand the frequency and depth of coverage, emerging themes, and tone of framing. They used three widely read online newspapers (Punch, The Vanguard and Nigerian Tribune to test the agenda-setting theory. The content analysis was used as the research method, and the unit of analysis was any news story that focused on coronavirus (COVID19) information in Nigeria. Reports on COVID-19 from other countries were excluded from the analysis. A total of 1899 articles, which comprised a combination of news stories, features, editorials, columns and opinion articles that were retrieved online from March 2020, when the pandemic forced the Nigerian Federal Government to impose a nationwide lockdown, to November 2020, when the lockdown started to ease gradually.

Though the findings in the above study revealed that the selected online newspapers did extensive coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority, that is 1104 (58.1%) of the articles reported were short (1-200 words). Only 17.3% of the articles were long (400 words and above). However, in terms of each newspaper, the results revealed that Punch newspaper reported the highest number of short words of 427 (38.7%) articles, followed by Vanguard newspaper with 381 (34.1%) articles and Nigerian Tribune newspaper with 296 (26.8%) articles. It can be concluded from this research that these newspapers gave fewer in-depth reports in relation to COVID-19.

Still relating to media coverage of COVID-19, Memon, Khuhro and Hashimani (2023) analysed how the Pakistani press framed this health crisis. They collected data from two highly circulated Urdu language newspapers (Jang and Nawa-i-Waqt) between the month of February and July 2020. According to the findings, Daily Nawa-i-Waqt reported a majority (52.9%) of the stories out of a total of 711 articles that mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic. Comparing the size of the stories in terms of number of words, it was observed that shorter stories (51.65% of stories with 100 to 300 words) and average stories (58.86% of stories with 400 to 600 words) were published in the Daily Jang newspaper, while only 48.35% and 41.14% were, respectively, published in the Daily Nawa-i-Waqt newspaper.

However, according to the data from the above study, a majority (92.86%) of stories that measured 700 or more words were published in the Daily Nawa-i-Waqat, compared to only 7.14% in the Daily Jang newspaper. The headline size is also one of the elements to measure media attention; this study revealed that a majority (54.3%) of their stories with multiple headlines were found in the Daily Nawa-i-Waqt newspaper, as compared to 45.7% in the Daily Jang. On the contrary, a majority (51.41%) of its stories using the single headline were found in the Daily Jang as compared to 48.59% for the Daily Nawa-i-Waqt. Though other findings were related to the framing of COVID-19 in the selected newspapers, the overall findings revealed that both newspapers provided proper attention to COVID-19, but they did not publish in-depth stories. The use of headlines as an element of attention-grabbing in the above study ties with Ifantido (2009) who had confirmed that headlines are used as a device to attract readers' attention to the full text of a newspaper article.

Onkeo (2021) explored how the Kenyan print media covered COVID-19 in the first seven days after the first infection was confirmed in that country. The key objectives were to examine the prominence the Kenyan media gave COVID-19 stories, identify the prominent

frames used and examine the extent to which stories on the disease were published in the first seven days after the first infection was confirmed in the country. A quantitative content analysis of the Daily Nation and The Standard newspapers was conducted. The data was analysed using SPSS and presented in tables to display patterns and relationships between variables. In terms of prominence, the results showed that stories on the pandemic were prominent in both papers, though more prominent in the Daily Nation.

As seen in the findings of the above research, most of these stories in the papers were placed on pages where they were easily seen, such as the front or back cover page, the first few pages that fall on the right side of the paper, or pages that have a banner or stripe headline related to the disease. Only 6% of the stories fell within the low focus category. Though the Standard had more stories on COVID-19 than the Daily Nation, the author maintained that they were less conspicuous to readers because of factors like length, placement in medium and low focus spaces. The author explained that several of the stories on The Standard appeared in brief, others as letters to the editor, while others appeared in counties round up, which are traditionally hardly prominent segments of the papers.

Otun, Ajilore and Bobmanuel (2022) studied how Nigerian newspapers covered the COVID-19 pandemic disease through the content of two prominent and daily circulated national newspapers. They used content analysis to determine the depth of coverage (size of spaces allocated to stories, positions of stories, sources of editorials, form and contents of the stories, speakers and actors interviewed and frequency) allocated to COVID-19 news between 1$^{st}$ of December 2019 to 30$^{th}$ of April 2020. Amongst the findings, the study revealed that the majority of the stories, 62% in The Guardian and 50% in The Nation, were allocated the 6 by 2 size and below. However, while The Guardian allocated 15.8% of their articles on COVID-19 a full page, The Nation gave only 7.8%. Also, only 10.0% and 6.6% Civid-19 stories were published on the front pages of The Guardian and The Nation, respectively.

Though the authors of the above study concluded that Nigerian newspapers provided adequate coverage of the epidemic and performed their social responsibility roles, reporting the outbreak of COVID-19 adequately by creating awareness, it is observed from the findings that a greater proportion of their stories on this disease were published on the inside pages. Hence, little visibility was given to stories that mentioned COVID-19. This study also failed to tell us the kinds of headlines that were used to publish stories on COVID-19. Revealing the sizes and colours of headlines would have helped readers to understand if the newspapers used them to catch the attention of readers.

With the aim of understanding how the media covered the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States under two different administrations, Dee and Khang (2023) adopted the content analysis method while using second-level agenda-setting theory as a guide. MSNBC, USA Today, Fox News, and The Daily Caller were the media sources that were examined. The study focused on five attributes of salience that included the use of partisan language, prevention/ protection, COVID-19-related statistics, and positive and negative sentiments. In one of the key findings, it was found that both Fox News and MSNBC talked about the pandemic and used out of the five attributes.

However, there is evidence from the above studies that there was a difference in the saliency of the attributes of each media outlet. For instance, it was reported that MSNBC and Fox News informed their audience about prevention/protection measures as well as COVID-related statistics. It should be noted that there was no clear distinction between the

two different media outlets that covered COVID-19 attributes. But a split was observed among different media organisations while examining the attribute salience of prevention/protection in media coverage of the pandemic. It was observed that this study was focused on the issue of salience that the media considered during the admiration of Trump and Biden. Interestingly, the findings showed that the media aligned with the ideology of the political parties in power.

The only study we came across, done in Cameroon in relation to how the media covered the COVID-19 pandemic, is that by Ndonko and Genna (2024). In this study, the authors focused on the role social media played in disseminating information about the pandemic. However, the methodology was qualitative with open-ended interviews of 15 informants in Bamenda. The findings revealed that social media helped to spread information about the disease quickly. It also helped to warn people about the disease by enabling them to learn about the disease, the risks involved and how to prevent it. The authors concluded that this helped the government with its public health programs. Though this study identified the role social media played in disseminating information during this period, it could not establish the extent to which it did so. Hence, it cannot be used to measure the attention the Cameroon media gave to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another study by Nyuidzewira (2023) examined public awareness by looking at public perceptions of COVID-19 media discourse and its ability to constitute a social threat in Cameroon. The researcher made use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods by using a questionnaire to survey medical students from the faculty of Health Sciences, University of Yaoundé I and a semi-structured interview of 25 editors of the media industry, respectively. Though this was not a content analysis study, it helped us to understand how the content of the media that is expected to play an educative role can, on the other hand, become a medium that contributes to the construction of a social threat. The findings revealed that 48.8% and 23.3% of the respondents, respectively, agreed and strongly agreed that COVID-19 media discourse through media messages about the pandemic constituted a social threat in Cameroon.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the agenda-setting theory. Ferreira, Alves and Varão (2020) disclosed that Professor Maxwell McCombs worked in partnership with Donald Shaw to develop the agenda-setting hypothesis, which is now considered a theory. They aimed to explain the influence of the mass media in relation to public affairs. According to them, this theory was formulated as a test of Walter Lippmann's ideas on public opinion. Walter Lippmann, who was a newspaper columnist, published "The Picture Outside and the Images in Our Heads" back in 1922. Then, Lippmann focused on the power of media messages in shaping daily opinions.

Lippmann's idea was later expanded in 1963 by Bernard Cohen, who asserted that the press may significantly succeed in telling people what to think about (Cohen, 1963). In the agenda setting theory, McCombs and Shaw (1972) predicted the ability of the media to tell audiences what issues are major and relevant, thus setting the "agenda". They, therefore, explained that the media can set the public's agenda in terms of what are the important issues to think about by controlling the amount of coverage they receive and the location of the coverage.

Moy, Tewksbury and Rinke (2016) stipulated that the media are able to shape individuals' perceptions of the relative importance and salience of these issues by virtue of providing differential levels of coverage to specific issues. They can achieve this by choosing what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space they give them. McCombs (2002) opined that mass media can also shape the ideas that people take into account when making judgments about politics or other issues by making some issues more salient in people's minds (agenda setting).

Evidence contained in agenda-setting studies shows how individuals easily understand the newsworthiness and importance of an issue depending on how it is presented in the news media. Their understanding of the news worthiness and importance of an issue is reliant on how editors decide to publish the stories. In broadcast news, the editors may decide to open the news with an issue to make it the most important story or get it published above the fold, as it may be in the case of a newspaper. The way the media emphasise on an issue influences the audience to also view the issue as important.

Tobechukwu (2007) explained that the media attach certain weights or importance to an issue through placement (positioning), size (length) and frequency (regularity) of appearance of the issue in the news. In return, audiences learn these salient issues from the news media, thus incorporating a similar set of weights and importance into their own personal agenda, as explained by the agenda-setting theorists, McCombs and Shaw in 1972. In this study, we explore the agenda setting theory in relation to the way the media emphasise an issue relating to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of how often the pandemic was mentioned, the positioning of the stories in the newspapers, the length of the stories, the sizes of the headlines and the format in which the stories were published.

## METHODOLOGY

Given that this study is out to measure the prominence the newspapers gave the COVID-19 pandemic, the methodological approach chosen was quantitative content analysis. This method facilitates the collection and transformation of data from text into numerical form. As explained in Sukamolson (2007) and Creswell (1994), this kind of transformed data allows statistical computations and deductions to explain a phenomenon. Aderogba (2021) added that it is thanks to content analysis that it is possible to study the content manifest of recorded information in a systematic and orderly manner.

Since the study deals with a large sample that spans one year, the quantitative content analysis was therefore more appropriate because it is a deductive approach that encompasses working from the more general to the more specific observations. On these bases, this method was used to examine the content of COVID-19 mentions in newspapers. In this study, three leading Cameroon newspapers: the lone State bilingual daily newspaper (Cameroon Tribune), leading private English daily (The Guardian Post) and another leading private French daily (Le Jour) were selected. They were selected because of their wide circulation and frequency of publication. Two editions each (Mondays and Thursdays' issues) of the aforementioned newspapers were selected weekly from the second week of March 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Cameroon, to the last week of February 2021.

The unit of analysis included any article (news, feature stories, opinions/columns, editorials, vox-pops, press releases, adverts, announcements, photographs/cartoons, etc.) that mentioned COVID-19-related issues irrespective of the topic. The time frame covered 12 months (1 year). Given that there are 52 weeks in a year, a total of 52 editions each were selected from the three newspapers. This gave a total of 156 editions within the selected one-year period for the study. The final population (mentions of the COVID-19 pandemic) stood at 2,575. The instrument used in this research was a coding sheet. A coding manual was developed with different content categories to guide the coders in capturing the data from the selected newspapers. The data was then entered into SPSS version 26 for processing.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The principal focus of this study was to analyse the mentions (frequencies), page placement, story length (depth), headline type and story format to determine which of the newspapers gave more attention and visibility to this health pandemic. The data below is based on the above stated elements to compare media attention toward pandemics and health crises in Cameroon using the case of COVID-19 in the three newspapers under study. An analysis of variance was used to measure the level of variance of the examined variables by newspaper.

**Table 1: Comparison by newspaper and monthly COVID-19 mentions**

| **Month of publication** | **Newspaper** | | | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cameroon Tribune** | **The Guardian Post** | **Le Jour** | |
| March 2020 | (70) 2.7% | (44) 1.7% | (63) 2.4% | (177) 6.9% |
| April 2020 | (165) 6.4% | (171) 6.6% | (133) 5.2% | (469) 18.2% |
| May 2020 | (158) 6.1% | (65) 2.5% | (81) 3.1% | (304) 11.8% |
| June 2020 | (177) 6.9% | (114) 4.4% | (63) 2.4% | (354) 13.7% |
| July 2020 | (134) 5.2% | (87) 3.4% | (21) 0.8% | (242) 9.4% |
| August 2020 | (151) 5.9% | (82) 3.2% | (54) 2.1% | (287) 11.1% |
| September 2020 | (82) 3.2% | (40) 1.6% | (38) 1.5% | (160) 6.2% |
| October 2020 | (87) 3.4% | (34) 1.3% | (32) 1.2% | (153) 5.9% |
| November 2020 | (77) 3.0% | (30) 1.2% | (19) 0.7% | (126) 4.9% |
| December 2020 | (67) 2.6% | (26) 1.0% | (12) 0.5% | (105) 4.1% |
| January 2021 | (76) 3.0% | (32) 1.2% | (21) 0.8% | (129) 5.0% |
| February 2021 | (28) 1.1% | (26) 1.0% | (15) 0.6% | (69) 2.7% |
| Total | (1272) 49.4% | (751) 29.2% | (552) 21.4% | (2575) 100.0% |
| *One-Way analysis of variance of newspaper and COVID-19 mentions* | | | | |
| *Date of publication* | *Df* | *SS* | *MS* | *F* | *p* |
| Between groups | 2 | 404.272 | 202.136 | 22.449 | .000 |
| Within groups | 2572 | 23159.359 | 9.004 | | |
| Total | 2574 | 23563.631 | | | |

Source: Field data 2022

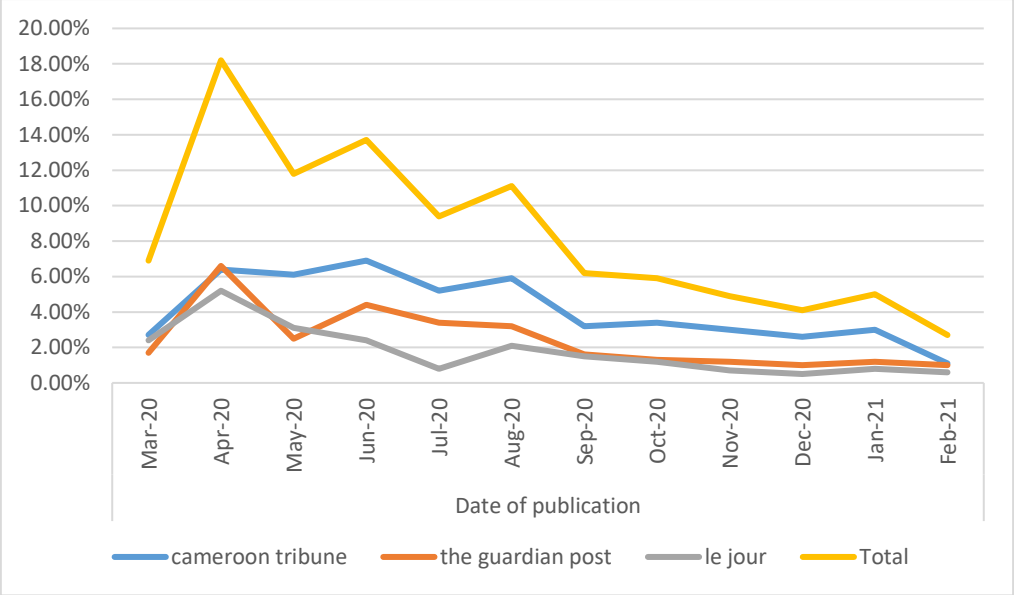


**Fig. 1: Graph showing monthly trends of COVID-19 mentions by newspapers from March 2020 to February 2021**

The data in Table 1 reveals that there were a total of 2575 articles that mentioned COVID-19 in the three newspapers from the month of March 2020 to February 2021. According to this data, almost half (49.4%) of the mentions were in Cameroon Tribune. This was followed by The Guardian Post with 29.2% and Le Jour with 21.4%. Cameroon Tribune is a state media that is at the service of the public. Therefore, the mentions of COVID-19 are higher in this newspaper than in the others because the government was using this channel to sensitise the population on preventive and barrier measures that had to be taken to prevent the spread of the virus. Hence, the paper performed its expected public service role to Cameroonians.

To better illustrate the trends of COVID-19 mentions over the 12-month period, the data in Table 1 was transformed into a graph (see Fig.1). The data depicts that overall, the highest period the three newspapers mentioned COVID-19 was April 2020 with 18.2%. After this period, the mentions of COVID-19 declined to 11.8% in the month of May and later rose to 13.7% in June. Another rise to 11.1% was witnessed in August 2020, and from there, the mentions steadily declined right down to 4.1% before starting to rise again to 5.0% around the period of January 2021, and finally declining again in February 2021 to 2.7%, the least recorded within the study period. Cameroon Tribune consistently had more COVID-19 mentions within the 12-month period, but for April 2020, The Guardian post had 2.0% higher than it.

It can be observed from the data that the newspapers did not give much attention to reporting COVID-19 in the month of March 2020. The newspapers only seem to have developed more interest in reporting on COVID-19 towards the month of April 2020, after the first case was reported in Cameroon on March 06, 2020. This period also coincided with the WHO Director General's declaration, stating the disease constitutes a global pandemic as earlier disclosed by Christian et., (2020)

- *Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the COVID-19 mentions by newspaper*

Notwithstanding the difference observed in terms of COVID-19 mentions in the newspapers, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine if this difference was statistically significant. The results, as seen in Table 1, showed that there was a statistically significant difference at the $p< 0.05$ level in COVID-19 mentions in the selected newspapers with $F (2,2572) = 22.449$, $p = 0.000$. The significance level of 0.000 is less than the threshold value of 0.05, indicating that there is no significant difference in the COVID-19 mentions by the newspaper, which can be rejected.

Despite reaching statistical significance, the researchers were interested in knowing the actual difference in the mean scores of COVID-19 mentions between the newspapers. A post-hoc comparison between the newspapers was conducted using Tukey's HSD test. The test indicated that there are large mean differences with significant values of 0.000 between Cameroon Tribune and The Guardian Post, as well as between Cameroon Tribune and Le Jour. On the other hand, there was a small mean difference with significant values of 0.020 between The Guardian Post and Le Jour. In this case, it can be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the Cameroon Tribune and other newspapers. On the other hand, there is no significant difference in the mentions of COVID-19 between The Guardian Post and Le Jour.

**Table 2: Comparison by newspapers and page placement of COVID-19 mentions**

| **Newspaper** | **Story placement** | | | | | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Front page** | **Pages 2 & 3** | **Other inside pages** | **Centre spread** | **Back page** | |
| Cameroon Tribune | (58) 27.0% | (66) 28.7% | (1029) 57.0% | (33) 28.4% | (86) 41.3% | (1272) 49.4% |
| The Guardian Post | (82) 38.1% | (89) 38.7% | (441) 24.4% | (61) 52 .6% | (78) 37.5% | (751) 29.2% |
| Le Jour | (75) 34.9% | (75) 32.6% | (336) 18.6% | (22) 19.0% | (44) 21.2% | (552) 21.4% |
| Total % within story placement | (215) 100.0% | (230) 100.0% | (1806) 100.0% | (116) 100.0% | (208) 100.0% | (2575) 100.0% |
| Total % within total | 8.3% | 8.9% | 70.1% | 4.5% | 8.1% | 100,0% |
| *One-Way analysis of variance of newspaper and COVID-19 mentions* | | | | | | |
| *Date of publication* | *Df* | *SS* | *MS* | *F* | *p* | |
| Between groups | 2 | 19.737 | 9.869 | 12.616 | .000 | |
| Within groups | 2572 | 2011.900 | .782 | | | |
| Total | 2574 | 2031.637 | | | | |

Source: Field data 2022

From Table 2, the data reveal that a majority (70.1%) of COVID-19 mentions were placed in other inside pages as opposed to 8.3%, 8.9%, 4.5% and 8.1% for the front page, pages 2 & 3, centre spread and back pages respectively. Amongst the newspapers, The Guardian Post happened to have published a greater proportion of front page (38.1%) and pages 2 & 3 (38.7%) stories that mentioned COVID-19, as compared to Le Jour and Cameroon Tribune with 34.9% & 32.6% and 27.0% & 28.7%, respectively. On the other hand, a majority

(57.0%) of COVID-19 mentions in other inside pages were published by Cameroon Tribune. This was followed by The Guardian Post with 24.4%, and Le Jour had the least with 18.6%. While in terms of the centre spread, The Guardian Post is reported to have published the majority (52 .6%). The percentage of Cameroon Tribune can be justified by the fact that the newspaper allocated specific pages to COVID-19 news. In terms of overall page placement in the three newspapers, the data shows that a majority of COVID-19 mentions were done in other inside pages, with 70.1%. This was followed by very low proportions of 8.9%, 8.3%, 8.1% and 4.5% for pages 2 & 3, front page, back page and centre spread, respectively.

- *Hypothesis two: There is no significant different by newspapers and page placement of COVID-19 mentions*

Notwithstanding, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to find out if there were significant differences in page placement of articles that mentioned the crisis and newspapers. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p< 0.05$ level page placement of COVID-19 for the three groups according to newspaper with $F (2, 2572) = 12.616$, $p = 0.000$ (see table 2). The significance level of 0.000 is less than the threshold value of 0.05, indicating that the hypothesis that there is no significant different by newspapers and page placement of COVID-19 mentions can be rejected.

Despite reaching statistical significance, the researcher went further to examine the actual difference in the mean scores between newspapers. A Post-hoc comparisons between the newspapers was conducted using the Tukey HSD test. The test indicated that there was a large mean difference between Le Jour newspaper and Cameroon Tribune, as well as between Le Jour Newspaper and The Guardian Post, with significant values of 0.000 and 0.004, respectively. This was not the case between Cameroon Tribune and The Guardian Post newspapers, as the mean difference was only 0.236.

**Table 3: Front-page treatment by newspapers and COVID-19 mentions**

| Newspaper | Front page placement/treatment | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Lead story | Other frontage position than the lead story | |
| Cameroon Tribune | (40) 39.6% | (18) 15.8% | (58) 27.0% |
| The Guardian Post | (19) 18.8% | (63) 55.3% | (82) 38.1% |
| Le Jour | (42) 41.6% | (33) 28.9% | (75) 34.1% |
| Total % within front page placement | (101100.0% | (114) 100.0% | (215) 100.0% |
| Total % within total | 47% | 53% | 100.0% |

Source: Field data 2022

From the data in Table 3, it reveals that out of 215 COVID-19 mentions published on the front pages of the newspapers, less than half (47%) were presented as lead stories, while a majority (53%) occupied other front-page positions other than lead stories. Though a greater proportion (38.1%) of the COVID-19 mentions on the front page were found in The Guardian Post, it represented only 18.8% of the lead stories. A greater proportion of the lead stories were published by the Le Jour and Cameroon Tribune with 41.6% and 39.6%,

respectively. On the contrary, a greater proportion (55.3%) of the front page COVID-19 mentions that were placed in other front-page positions other than lead stories were found in The Guardian Post, as opposed to 28.9% and 15.8% that were found in Le Jour and Cameroon Tribune, respectively.

**Table 4: Comparison by newspaper and story size (depth or length) of COVID-19 mentions**

| **Story length** | **Newspaper** | | | **Total** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Cameroon Tribune** | **The Guardian Post** | **Le Jour** | | |
| More than a full page | (20) 43.5% | (13) 28.3% | (13) 28.3% | (46) 1.8% | |
| Full page | (50) 55.6% | (16) 17.8% | (24) 26.7% | (90) 3.5% | |
| ¾ page | (82) 67.8% | (23) 19.0% | (16) 13.2% | (121) 4.7% | |
| Half page | (480) 62.3% | (205) 26.6% | (86) 11.2% | (771) 29.9% | |
| ¼ page | (403) 39.5% | (370) 36.3% | (246) 24.1% | (1019) 39.6% | |
| Less than ¼ | (237) 44.9% | (124) 23.5% | (167) 31.6% | (528) 20.5% | |
| Total | (1272) 49.4% | (751) 29.2% | (552) 21.4% | (2575) 100.0% | |
| *One-Way analysis of variance of newspaper article length and COVID-19 mentions* | | | | | |
| *Date of publication* | *Df* | *SS* | *MS* | *F* | *p* |
| Between groups | 2 | 55.389 | 27.694 | 24.301 | .000 |
| Within groups | 2572 | 2931.195 | 1.140 | | |
| Total | 2574 | 2986.584 | | | |

Source: Field data 2022

In the context of story size, the data in Table 4 depict that a greater proportion (39.6%) of COVID-19 mentions were published as a ¼ page, followed by 29.9% as a half page and 20.5% as less than a ¼ page. On the other hand, only 1.8%, 3.5% and 4.7% were published as more than a full page, full page and ¾ page, respectively. Furthermore, the results revealed that Cameroon Tribune published a greater proportion of COVID-19 mentions that covered more than a full page, with 20 (43.5%). The Guardian Post and Le Jour did so with 28.3% each. Similarly, Cameroon Tribune also published a majority of COVID-19 mentions that covered a full page with 55.6%, as opposed to 26.7% for 17.8% Le Jour and The Guardian Post, respectively. The findings suggest that a majority of the COVID-19-related stories were brief reports, hence there were few stories that gave in-depth analysis of this health pandemic.

- *Hypothesis three: There is no significant different by newspapers and the story size (depth) of COVID-19 mentions*

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to find out if there were significant differences in size (depth) of articles that mentioned COVID-19 and the selected newspapers. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level of story that mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic at $F(2, 2572) = 24.301$, $p = 0.000$ (see Table 4). The significance level of 0.000 is less than the threshold value of 0.05, indicating that the hypothesis that there is no significant difference by newspapers and story size (depth) of COVID-19 mentions can be rejected.

This research went further to examine if there are any statistical differences between the means of three newspapers (A Post-hoc comparison) using the Tukey HSD test. The test indicated that there was a significant difference between Cameroon Tribune and The Guardian Post, as well as Le Jour, with a significance value of 0.000 each. However, the mean difference between Le Jour and The Guardian Post also produced the value of 0.015. Hence, there is a significant difference in terms of story size (depth) of COVID-19 mentions between Cameroon Tribune and the other newspapers. On the other hand, there was no significant difference observed in this case between The Guardian Post and Le Jour newspapers.

**Table 5: Comparison by newspapers and headline types of COVID-19 mentions**

| Headline type | Newspaper | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Cameroon Tribune | The Guardian Post | Le Jour | |
| Banner headline | (52) 4.1% | (331) 44.1% | (107) 19.4% | (490) 19.0% |
| Banner with rider | (75) 5.9% | (11) 1.5% | (38) 6.9% | (124) 4.8% |
| Banner with kicker | (63) 5.0% | (96) 12.8% | (32) 5.8% | (191) 7.4% |
| Banner with rider & kicker | (401) 31.5% | (10) 1.3% | (2) 0.4% | (413) 16.0% |
| Secondary headline | (63) 5.0% | (170) 22.6% | (13) 2.4% | (246) 9.6% |
| Secondary with kicker | (85) 6.7% | (32) 4.3% | (0) 0.0% | (117) 4.5% |
| Secondary headline with rider | (408) 32.1% | (22) 2.9% | (238) 43.1% | (668) 25.9% |
| Subordinate headline | (118) 9.3% | (78) 10.4% | (110) 19.9% | (306) 11.9% |
| No headline (cartoons) | (7) 0.6% | (1) 0.1% | (12) 2.2% | (20) 0.8% |
| Total | (1272) 100.0% | (751) 100.0% | (552) 100.0% | (2575) 100.0% |

Source: Field data 2022

The data in Table 6 depict that out of the 1272 COVID-19 mentions in Cameroon Tribune, a greater proportion (32.15 and 31.5%) had a secondary headline with rider and banner headline with rider & kicker, respectively. COVID-19 mentions that had a banner headline with rider, a banner headline with kicker, a secondary headline, and a banner headline had very low percentages with 5.9%, 5.0%, 5.0% and 4.1%, respectively. In the case of The Guardian Post, a greater proportion (44.1%) of COVID-19 mentions were published with a banner headline. This was followed by 22.6% with a secondary headline, while banner headline with a rider & kicker and banner headline with a rider had the least with 1.3% and 1.5%, respectively.

Whereas Le Jour had a greater proportion (43.1%) of its COVID-19 mentions published using a secondary headline with a rider. The least was a secondary headline with a kicker that had a 0.0%, which was followed by a 0.4% banner headline with rider & kicker. The general trend in terms of proportion of headlines in all three newspapers shows that more (25.9%) COVID-19 mentions were published using a secondary headline with rider, while the least was 4.5% for articles with a secondary headline with kicker. There were some COVID-19 mentions without headlines. These mentions were published in the form of cartoons.

**Table 6: Comparison of newspapers by articles/formats of COVID-19 mentions**

| Story format | Newspaper | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Cameroon Tribune | The Guardian Post | Le Jour | |
| News | (919) 72.2% | (633) 84.3% | (323) 58.5% | (1875) 72.8% |
| Editorial | (8) 0.6% | (35) 4.7% | (1) 0.2% | (44) 1.7% |
| Features | (36) 2.8% | (45) 6.0% | (96) 17.4% | (177) 6.9% |
| Opinion/column/interviews | (228) 17.9% | (29) 3.9% | (84) 15.2% | (341) 13.2% |
| Vox-pop | (33) 2.6% | (0) 0.0% | (4) 0.7% | (37) 1.4% |
| Letters to the editor | (1) 0.1% | (1) 0.1% | (0) 0.0% | (2) 0.1% |
| Cartoon | (7) 0.6% | (1) 0.1% | (7) 1.3% | (15) 0.6% |
| Announcement | (27) 2.1% | (5) 0.7% | (4) 0.7% | (36) 1.4% |
| Advert | (3) 0.2% | (0) 0.0% | (10) 1.8% | (13) 0.5% |
| Others | (10) 0.8% | (2) 0.3% | (23) 4.2% | (35) 1.4% |
| Total | (1272) 100.0% | (751) 100.0% | (552) 100.0% | (2575) 100.0% |

Source: Field data 2022

The data in Table 6 indicate that the selected Cameroonian newspapers reported COVID-19 in the form of news stories, editorials, features, opinion/column/interviews, vox pops, letters to the editor cartoons, and others. According to this finding, the majority of the COVID-19 mentions in all three newspapers were straight or hard news, representing 72.8%. This was followed by opinion/column/interviews with only 13.2%, features with 6.9%. While editorials, announcements, vox-pops, cartoons, adverts, and letters to the editor had 1.7%, 1.4%, 1.4%, 0.6%, 0.5% and 0.1%, respectively. Individually, the majority (72.2%, 84.3%, and 58.5%) of the mentions of COVID-19 in Cameroon Tribune, The Guardian Post, and Le Jour, respectively, were news.

## DISCUSSION

This study was conceived with the purpose of examining how Cameroon newspapers reported the COVID-19 pandemic to understand the extent of media coverage in terms of frequency and depth of COVID-19 mentions. The aim was to establish which, amongst Cameroon Tribune, The Guardian Post, and Le Jour, paid more attention to this health pandemic in terms of number of publications, page placement, story length, etc. These aspects deal with the visibility and prominence of COVID-19 in the chosen newspapers.

The findings showed that Cameroon Tribune had almost half (49.4%) of all COVID-19 mentions within the period considered for this study (March 2020 to February 2021). The newspaper also almost consistently led in the monthly COVID-19 mentions, but for the month of April 2020, The Guardian Post slightly carried more COVID-19 mentions. Hence, it paid more attention to the pandemic than other newspapers. This was confirmed using a statistical test (ANOVA) that examined the level of significant difference in terms of COVID-19 mentions in the newspapers. The result produced a p-value = 0.000 between Cameroon Tribune and The Guardian Post as well as between Cameroon Tribune and Le Jour, thereby indicating that there was a statistically significant difference between Cameroon Tribune and other newspapers.

It should be noted that Cameroon Tribune is a state-owned daily newspaper. Such newspapers accompany the government's effort in a crisis situation. In this case, the government was handling a global pandemic that was of national concern, using this newspaper more. There was even a special column, Cameroon Tribune introduced in their publications called *Reposte COVID*, which kept readers up-to-date with the evolution of the virus in Cameroon. Cameroon Tribune is a public service media. Their support for government efforts is a key aspect of their function in public health communication by serving as a primary and authoritative channel for the government to disseminate timely, accurate public health information and counter widespread misinformation and rumours.

In terms of visibility, that is, story placement and kinds of headlines used, The Guardian Post, as per the findings, is seen to have given more visibility to COVID-19 stories than the other newspapers. For example, The Guardian Post published 38.1% and 38.7% of its COVID-19 coverage on the front page and pages 2 & 3, respectively. The front page and pages 2 & 3 are those pages in a newspaper often first visited by readers. It is stated in Moki (2020), Joseph (2015) and McQuail (2010) that the front page of the newspaper is the most important location where readers can find a representation of society's most critical events. They maintain that the first page of a newspaper is used by editors to set the agenda on what the public will debate by placing the most prominent news and issues. Hence, editors devote lots of their know-how to determine which stories to publish on this page, which they consider as premium.

Though the newspapers generally carried more (25.9%) of secondary headlines with riders, The Guardian Post had 44.1% of its stories published with banner headlines as opposed to 19.4% and 4.1% for Le Jour and Cameroon Tribune, respectively. This adds to the efforts of The Guardian Post in giving more visibility to the COVID-19 pandemic to newspaper readers. This can be confirmed using Ifantido (2009), who stated that headlines play the role of getting and retaining the attention of readers to the full text of an article. Banner headlines, which are the largest in terms of newspaper headlines, will definitely serve to catch the attention of readers more than those smaller in size.

Generally, the newspapers gave less in-depth reports on COVID-19. This is because editorials, opinions and features which give details on topical issues registered low percentages, whereas, straight news stories represented a startling 72.8%. Also, a greater proportion (39.6%, 29.9% and 20.5%) of reports were a ¼ page, half page and less than ¼ page, respectively. These findings are similar to those of Uwom and Oloyede (2014), who found that a majority of health stories were given little space in the media. The implication is that there were less in-depth reports on this health pandemic by the Cameroon print media.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical evidence gathered from this study, it can be concluded that over a period of one year, the three dailies played their role of informing the public on the advent and evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cameroon. Hence, setting the agenda by making COVID-19 issues more salient in people's minds through repeated mentioning. These newspapers prioritised the COVID-19 pandemic by frequently mentioning it, thereby playing their social responsibility role to create awareness of the existence of this health pandemic.

However, the state daily, Cameroon Tribune, extensively covered the pandemic as opposed to other private media by mentioning the pandemic more in its content. This is evident in the publication of almost half (49.4%) of the total number of articles that mentioned COVID-19 in the selected newspapers within the study period. On the other hand, the English daily, The Guardian Post, gave more visibility in reporting the pandemic by placing more of its COVID-19 mentions on its front page than the other newspapers. It also published a greater majority (44.1%) of COVID-19 mentions using banner headlines; hence, cementing its role in giving more visibility or prominence to the pandemic than the other newspapers.

Considering the findings of this study, it is recommended that the media should in future not only focus on mentioning health pandemics in their reports but should give them more prominence and visibility by placing them on the front pages and using banner headlines to catch readers' attention. Similarly, the media should consider giving more in-depth coverage on health pandemics like COVID-19. Less depth stories are often scanty and lack scientific details.

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