

Framing of Cartoons on Ebola Virus Disease in Selected Nigerian Dailies: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

All cartoon illustrations differ in frames and individuals' understanding of their messages. This study examined three Nigerian daily newspapers: Daily sun, Vanguard and the Nation to ascertain the frames of Ebola cartoon, the perception of the cartoon by the audience, and the interpretation of the cartoon messages. The researcher situates his work on the "play theory" which asserts that we use the media for our satisfaction, and that media contents bring changes in our lives. Qualitative content analysis and focus group discussion methods were used as methodology of the study. The study covered a period of one month from August 1st, 2014 to August 31st, 2014. The findings of the study revealed that most cartoons on Ebola virus had the fear frames. Also, most of the audience couldn't interpret the cartoon messages due to lack of understanding of the drawings. It was recommended among others, that cartoonists should make their drawings less technical but simple for easy understanding by the audience.

Keywords: Cartoon; Framing; Exposure; Cartoon frame

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Introduction

Cartoons in newspapers are humorous sketches that satirize issues in the society while telling stories at the same time. They are single panel graphics that comment on various issues in the society ranging from political events and policy, to health, sports, and business and entertainment topics. The *Jyllands-Posten's* Muhammad cartoons controversy in Denmark first published in September 2005, which sparked violent protests around the world, speak to the continuing importance and potential power of cartoons as a medium of political communication [1,2].

Cartoons have been described as effective channels for the formation of public opinion on salient social issues [3-6]. They are seen as "both opinion-molding and opinion-reflecting" [7], and they provide subtle frameworks within which to examine the life and political processes of a nation [8]. Cartoons are intended to transform otherwise complex and opaque social events and situations into quick and easily readable depictions that facilitate comprehension of the nature of social issues and events [3]. They present society with visually palpable and hyper-ritualized depictions (selectively exaggerated portions of 'reality') that attempt to reveal the essence and meaning of social events.

Cartoons are important components of print media in Nigeria. They are featured in almost every hard news newspaper in the

country. They use imagery, metaphor, symbolism and other rhetorical devices, to define political and other situations and attempt to interpret topical issues and events visually in a manner that is amusing and thought-provoking [1]. Cartoons have always been part of Nigeria's print media history, contributing immensely in the struggle for independence and other nationalist struggles. The exploits of Akinola Lasekan, with his editorial cartoons in the '*West African Pilot*' in the 1940's and 50's reflect colonial life, and also depict the struggle for nationhood which later culminated in Nigeria's independence in 1960. In addition, cartoonists like Dele Jegede, Josy Ajiboye, Aliu Eroje, BoyeGbenro, Akin Onipede among others through their cartoons have decried the rapid deterioration of the Nigerian state, in the hands of corrupt political leaders [1]. The metaphors and other figurative devices used in the visual language of editorial cartoons are often 'powerful' and the key purpose is to reflect and maintain power relationships in a given political structure. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, political cartoons, serve as a unique record of the particular events, attitudes and narratives present during a moment in political history [1,8].

Cartoons are effective tools for criticizing wrong actions in the society and calling the attention of the public and their leaders to burning national issues of national interest and development [9]. Cartoon has been a major feature of every newspaper and

magazine in recent times, some of which are presented in series. The vanguard newspaper for instance, carry very apt cartoon titled "Mr. and Mrs." in the front page it's Monday through to Friday editions.

Cartoon message understanding varies from one individual to another and is highly influenced by its framing. The feedback mechanism of communication rates the effectiveness of a cartoon, its framing and its message understanding [10].

This vital content of mass media has however, received minimal research attention and or critical analysis in the public's eye and in professional journals, even as it has attracted least mention in the intellectual fora. Against this backdrop, this work focuses on the use of cartoons by Nigerian newspapers to communicate messages on the Ebola virus diseases to the audience. Ebola virus is a virus that has been a thing of worry in West African countries after emanating from Liberia. Several cartoons have been drawn in newspapers and magazines in Nigeria and in the press of other countries on this disease. This work examines the nature of 'Ebola cartoons', their framing and interpretation by the audience.

Problem of Study

With the cases of Ebola virus that existed in Nigeria and other West African countries (and has resurfaced in Sierra Leon), there continues to arise the need to intense and intensive awareness creation on the disease as a way of curbing the spread. The print media are very essential in the achievement of awareness-creation goals in the Nigerian society. This feat of the media has been exhibited in the areas of political education, social education, cultural education, health education. The problem therefore is to establish how cartoons on Ebola virus help to create awareness and health consciousness among the audience irrespective of its comic display.

Cartoon Framing and Message Understanding

Cartoon framing is a major factor that affects the fidelity of communication from the communicators. Cartoon framing is simply the structure of concept, values, customs, worldviews, etc., by means of which an individual or group perceive or evaluate cartoon messages [10]. Every individual has a unique frame of reference that influences his or her perception of reality and communicated messages [11]. This is why Guffery [12] says that another barrier to clear communication is a person's frame of reference. Guffery says a person sees and feels in the world is translated through the person's individual frame of reference.

The framing of Ebola cartoons may differ from each other. The frame may be information frame –where the essence of the illustration is to inform the public; it may be fear frame-where the audience perceive the cartoon message as being fearful as regards the danger of Ebola virus, that is, the cartoon message instilling fear in the audience members; it may also be a responsibility frame-where the cartoon is targeting the government's or health ministry's weaknesses in tackling the virus.

The Concepts of Media Framing and Media Representation

Framing involves giving an angle to an event with a view that the audience or readers would perceive the story from the perspective of the media reporting same [13]. This view is supported by Entman who sees framing as "the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described". To Entman, therefore, framing can simply be summarized as involving "selection and salience".

Media framing and representation, therefore, refers to the art and act of the media, whether print, electronic or even the social media, giving prominence to an issue or personality by selecting and giving more prominence and emphasis on such issue or personality thus drawing and focusing the attention of the people in the direction of the issue or personality [13]. This position is given vent to by Iyengar and Kinder when they argued that "by lavishing news coverage on an issue while ignoring others, the media draw attention to certain aspects of political life at the expense of the others". Thus, he further argued that "issues highlighted in the media become the standard by which media audiences judge politicians and elective office seekers" for "if it is crime that dominates the media agenda, not only does crime become public enemy number one, crime also becomes the principal yardstick for evaluating president's or congress's performance".

Flowing from the above, therefore, is that the degree of coverage and salience given to events, issued or phenomena by the media would go a long way in determining people knowledge, exposures, views, opinions and/or suggestions about such event, issue or phenomenon. Thus, the framing of cartoons on Ebola virus could determine how the audience will understand the message.

Objectives

1. To ascertain the framing of cartoon topic on Ebola virus.
2. To ascertain the audience perception of the cartoon on Ebola virus.
3. To ascertain audience interpretation of the message portrayed in the cartoon on Ebola virus.

Research questions

1. What is the framing of cartoon topic on Ebola virus?
2. What is the audience's perception of the cartoon on Ebola virus?
3. What is the audience interpretation of the message portrayed in the cartoon on Ebola virus?

Theoretical framework

The theory suitable for this work is the *play theory* of mass communication. The *play theory* propounded by William Stephenson mainly emphasized on how we use the media for our satisfaction and also how media bring changes in our lives according to its content. The theory is based on a field where pain is in one end and pleasures the other. The theory which is closely-related to the *uses and gratifications theory* is mainly used to get pleasure out of its usage than as the medium of information and education. When we use the media, we might use it as an intensification of ourselves by relating the event which is presented in the media with our real lives. For instance, people tend to have different interpretations of the Ebola cartoon. While some see it as a pro-active measure to Ebola spread, others see it as satiric illustration and mockery against Africans. This illustration can be related to real life happening and people tend to see it as a continuation of their experiences.

Methodology

The methods of study adopted for this study is qualitative content analysis and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The qualitative content analysis is the study of manifest contents of documents without quantification. It was adopted in this study because it made for easy analysis of the cartoons on Ebola adopting the conventional content analysis procedure but without quantification of the results. The FGD is a rapid assessment, semi-structured data gathering method in which a purposively selected group is interviewed to get research-based information. It was adopted because it provided the platform for participants to freely express their feelings on the cartoons on Ebola without being restricted to closed-ended questions. Four trained assistants helped the researcher in conducting the FGD sessions. The population of this study work is 36 national daily newspapers registered by the newspapers proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN).

For this study, the researchers purposively selected 3 national daily newspapers that contain cartoons about Ebola virus. The newspapers are: *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard* and *The Nation*. The choice of selecting these three newspapers is simply based on the researchers' discretion and the newspapers are among the most popular national dailies in Nigeria. A period of one month was the focus of study, that is, cartoons on Ebola published in the selected newspapers within August 1st, 2014, through to August 31st, 2014. Students of Anambra State University (ANSU), Igbariam campus were purposively selected for the study. Anambra State University is a three-campus State-owned University located in Uli (the administrative headquarters), Igbariam, and Amaku, all cities in Anambra State, South-east Nigeria. It has a student population of approximately 16,000.

Result from the qualitative analysis

This study shows that fear frame was predominant in the presentation of Ebola cartoons. This is based on the fact that most of the Ebola cartoons were horrific, some of the cartoons depict tension, shock and fear, while some others used terrific

objects like grave, darkness, ghost, giant snakes and terrific images in their presentations. Some of the cartoons also used terrific words like: 'harmful', 'noxious', 'kill', 'terrifying', 'deadly' among others. For instance, one of the cartoons (**Figure 1**) from the *Vanguard* Newspaper on August 5th, 2014, shows a Nigerian overwhelmed with the joy of seeing his country play Guinea in the men's football competition but the "good news" turned bad for his two friends at the other end as "the country is among the countries noted for Ebola presence". The framing of the cartoon message is fearful, that is, it has a fear frame. Also, another cartoon (**Figure 2**) by Hobis Obilonu in the *Vanguard* on August 15th, 2014, shows two elite men getting shocked at seeing a board showing "Ebola is Real", as the cartoonist notes, "prevention they say is better than cure..." the cartoon has both fear and information frames. A terrific cartoon by Dane Granlond shows the dominance of fear frame in Ebola cartoons displays. The cartoon shows a 'disease control' agent being held firm and pulled by two shrunken, stricken and terrific hands from a grave at midnight. This depicts fear frame.

The textual analysis also shows that apart from the fear frame, a good number of the Ebola cartoons have information and responsibility frames. For instance, a cartoon in *The Nation* shows three people from different religions making supplications as they connote a traditionalist; a Moslem and a Christian (**Figure 3**). The inscription on the cartoon reads "Behold! As we rub shoulders and elbows in brotherhood, we pray that Ebola will not rob us of our lives. Amen!" The cartoon is tasking the different religious societies in the country to keep fanatic intents aside and join hands in fighting the virus. The cartoon however has a responsibility frame.

Analysis of the focus group discussion (FGD)

Four trained assistants helped the researchers in conducting the FGD sessions. The FGD was conducted at Anambra State University (ANSU) Igbariam Campus and environs. Ten sessions were conducted as follows: On Thursday, September 4th, 2014: FGD session was conducted with 11 400 level students of Mass Communication Department at the departmental complex; another session was held with 9 students from different



Figure 1 Daily sun, August 4, 2014.



Figure 2 Hobis Obilonum, Vanguard Newspaper; August 15.

departments at the school field of ANSU, Igbariam Campus; another FGD session was held with 12 final year students of English Department at the ICT building, Igbariam Campus; another FGD session was held with 12 final year students of Public Administration Department at the ICT building; and an FGD session was held with 11 final year students of Political Science Department at the ICT complex.

On Friday, September 5th, 2014, the FGD continued with 12 students from Nicom Villa lodge, Ukwulu, a community close to the university which hosts students' residential buildings; another FGD session was held with 12 students from Vic-Phranc lodge, Ukwulu; another FGD session was held with 11 students from Corner-Stone Lodge, Umudioka, a community close to the University which also hosts residential buildings of students. All these sessions were done at the students' lodges.

On Saturday, September 6th, 2014, there were FGD sessions with 9 students at Shalom Lodge, Ukwulu, and 9 others at a viewing centre in Ukwulu. A total of 10 groups consisting of 109 people were studied in 3 days; 63.3% (n=69) were males while 36.7% (n=40) were females; 5.5% (n=6) of the 109 people were business men while 94.5% (n=103) were students. The age bracket of the selected audience ranges from 19 to 34 years.

Results

The results of the FGD were determined by the questions of study.

Research question one

What is the framing of cartoon topics?

From the FGD sessions conducted, majority of the participants opined that the cartoons are both funny and fearful, i.e., humour and fear frames. However, few of the participants stated that the cartoons are mockery for Africans, though informative. One of the participants, Chinenye Agwuncha, a 400 level student of Public Administration said, "I saw the cartoons and I think they are simply mocking Africans though they are informative." The point here is that some of the cartoons have mockery frame.

Research question two

What is the audience's perception of the cartoon?

A good number of the participants perceived the cartoon as being informative. One of the participants who is a 200 level student of English said, "I believe the newspaper wants to use the cartoons to inform the public about this deadly virus. It is good for Nigerians as it will impact health consciousness among them." Some others however, perceived the cartoons as being funny. At Shalom Lodge, a participant, Chiagozie Ufondu opined "the cartoons are just funny".

Research question three

What is the audience interpretation of the cartoon message?

A good number of the participants gave wrong interpretation of the cartoon messages while many couldn't interpret the message behind the cartoon. For instance, some of the participants opined that the cartoons are used to create humour in order to ease the fear among Nigerians. One of the participants said "I don't think the cartoons have any special interpretation if not to create humour. Aside this, I don't know".

Majority of the participants identified the cartoon on "Ebola is Real" (**Figure 3**) as the easiest in terms of interpretation and understanding based on the fact that it is straight and simple. Uju Maduka, a 100 level student of English said, "the cartoons are too technical and confusing but I prefer this one (**Figure 3**) because it is easy to interpret and understand".

Discussion of Findings

Most cartoons on Ebola virus have fear frame. The textual analysis shows that majority of the cartoons on Ebola virus have the fear factors or horrific elements. This has brought about the heightened fear among Nigerians on the devastating effect of the Ebola virus. However, the Nigerian public has taken some proactive measures to avoid Ebola virus. This brings to the fore-the *play theory*, which shows how the media influence us and how we end up being influenced and how our lives change.

The audience has different perceptions of the cartoon due to the fact of individual differences. That is why Agbanu [11] posits that every individual has a unique frame of reference that influences his or her perception of reality and communicated



Figure 3 The Nation, August 15, 2014.

messages. The textual analysis of the selected cartoons shows that a good number of the audience perceives cartoons on Ebola virus as creating humour. This brings to the fore, the concept of *play theory* of communication which studies subjective play, how communication serves the cause of self-enhancement and personal pleasure, and the role of entertainment as an end in itself [14]. The play/comic element is a vital feature of cartoon. Without a notion of the play element in communication, one would be led to imagine that every televised docudrama or cartoon would be immediately lived out by every adolescent [14].

Most cartoons were misinterpreted due to their extreme technicalities. It is therefore important that cartoonist should be more creative and direct as cartoons on Ebola virus are good for Nigerians and Africans at large as they encourage good health standards in the country. This supported the finding by Aina [15] that, after a study of cartoons in four Nigerian Newspapers - the Guardian, Concord, Daily Sketch and the Observer—there was a wide gap of understanding between the cartoonists and the cartoon audience.

Conclusion

The work on “cartoon framing and message understanding” has discussed the meaning of cartoon, the nature of cartoon, and the

relevance of cartoon in national development. The cumulative effect of all is that cartoon not only contributes to national development but also a potent tool in creating awareness on the Ebola virus widespread in the West Africa. The work is premised on the *play theory* of mass communication, where some parts of the audience are favored by the cartoon message at one end at the detriment of others.

This study concludes that most cartoons on Ebola virus have fear frames. That is to say, the cartoons made the audience to fear the devastating effects of the Ebola virus. The audience however, believed the cartoon is good for the Nigerians as it will equip the people with the strategies of fighting the virus. The interpretation of the cartoon messages wasn't encouraging. The audience members have shallow interpretation of the messages unlike the cartoonists' perception. This was caused by the over-technicality of the messages.

This study recommends that cartoonists should understand that cartoon is means of communication. They should therefore make cartoons clearer for easy understanding. They shouldn't trivialize serious issues always. They should always make people afraid by emphasizing on fear frame only but also on information frame as information is a vital tool for national development. Researchers should do further studies on cartoon frames.

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