



TRUTH IN THE TIME OF COVID: DISSECTING GHANA'S INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM THROUGH HERMAN AND CHOMSKY'S LENS

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the media played a vital role in transmitting truthful information alongside misguiding false messages. Research evaluates media coverage effects on public discussions throughout Ghana after the government struggled against the spread of fake information about pandemic treatments and vaccines and their origins. According to Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, this study evaluates how media institutions backing the government ended up promoting official statements through their platforms though independent outlets and social media channels became place where authentic reporting occurred alongside dangerous misinformation.

Media framing shows direct influence over how people trusted health authorities and followed their health-demanding protocols. The official media platforms, which were associated with government, promoted public safety guidelines simultaneously as social media networks disseminated false information that weakened people's compliance with protection measures. The research establishes the requirement to evaluate how media representations combine with state communication and public awareness in crises, which turn life-threatening misinformation into a problem. This research reveals the challenges in deceptive media influences, which fills gaps in crisis communication literature to benefit policymakers together with journalists. The authors suggest enhancing fact-checking programs while teaching people to better understand media information and requiring public health officials to clearly communicate their messages. The research confirms that free media in democracies plays an essential role because it enables journalists to monitor authorities while blocking false information. The study makes an important global contribution to emergency health media analysis by demonstrating why accuracy should replace sensationalism in the media landscape. Ghana's experience provides worthwhile lessons, which should guide other nations fighting pandemic-related misinformation during this age of wide-ranging incorrect information spreading freely.

Keywords: COVID-19, Information, Misinformation, Noam Chomsky, Media, Propaganda

Introduction

When COVID-19 began in China, it quickly changed the world in ways we have never seen before (Okereke et al., 2021). Many people became sick or died from the virus, and it affected everyday life (Haleem et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020). Ghana's encounter with COVID-19 began on March 12, 2020, when initial cases were confirmed through tests at the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, University of Ghana, the cases were traced back to Turkey and Norway (Boateng et al., 2024a; Ministry of Health Ghana, 2020; Yendork & James, 2020). By September 21, 2021, the nation had registered 125,565 cases and approximately 1,125 deaths (WHO, 2021). In response, the government implemented measures to prevent the spread, including lockdown measures and social distancing (Boateng et al., 2024b).

Among the hurdles encountered during the pandemic, Naeem and Bhatti (2020) noted the rampant



spread of misinformation, an issue WHO raised, emphasizing the overwhelming amount of information circulating since late December 2019. WHO (2020) further acknowledged that this surge in information often led to public disorientation concerning the virus's origins and treatments. This phenomenon of widespread misinformation has been termed an "infodemic" by the WHO, as explained by Zarocstas (2020), signifying an uncontrolled spread of information in parallel with the epidemic.

Media independence is a prerequisite for a thriving democracy, as it helps to ensure government accountability and facilitates the free exchange of ideas (Boateng & Darkwa, 2021a; McQuail, 1992). In Ghana, the media landscape has evolved significantly since the democratic transition of the early 1990s. This evolution has seen the media grow into a vibrant and essential institution for democratic consolidation (Boateng & Darkwa, 2021b; Darkwa & Acquah, 2023). It serves as a channel for providing essential information to the public, holding governments accountable, and giving voice to diverse societal opinions (Darkwa et al., 2024a; Hasty, 2005). This study examines COVID-19 issues presented on Newsfile on the Multimedia channel in Ghana through the lens of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model to reveal the state of journalism in a democratic setting.

The constitutional right to media freedom in Ghana is enshrined in Chapter 12 of the 1992 Constitution. This legal safeguard is a cornerstone for the flourishing of democracy in the country (Ghana Constitution, 1992). It provides an enabling environment for the media to operate without undue interference, thereby enhancing their role in democratic governance (Boateng & Darkwa, 2021b). Numerous studies have explored the role of independent media in Ghana's democracy Shardow & Sare, (2016), Nyarko & Peer-Tomaselli, (2018), Ansong (2012), and Karikari, (1996). Ansong (2012) opines that the media have played a pivotal role in the democratic consolidation of Ghana, while Karikari (2007) notes that despite the constitutional guarantees, the media faces challenges such as political pressure and economic constraints that could undermine their independence.

Even though it is essential to look at accurate information versus misinformation during Ghana's COVID-19 crisis, research on how the government's communication through media shaped public discourse and understanding is noticeably scant. Insights into how state communications influenced public perceptions through the media warrant further attention for a more nuanced comprehension of the dynamics at play.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap by examining the dissemination of COVID-19 information and misinformation and analyzing the government's role in shaping societal viewpoints. The research employs Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model to explain this. By applying Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, researcher aims to assess the media's influence on the public's prioritization of issues based on how the media portrayed the government's stance on COVID-19, fashioning interpretations and potentially swaying public perception.

The outcomes of this investigation promise to enrich the body of existing literature, delivering a substantive analysis of the interplay between government, media, and public awareness. It will also offer insights into how citizens can discern and protect themselves against manipulative media influences during global crises.

Theoretical Framework: Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model

This section discusses the Propaganda Model, as detailed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their seminal work "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media," It explains how propaganda and systemic biases function in mass media. The Propaganda model represents a 'general theory of the Free Press,' offering an institutional critique of mass media behavior (Klaehn, 2018).

More specifically, it looks at the interlocks between the media, dominant social institutions, powerful elites, and the market. The fundamental argument is that the propaganda model looks at structural and political-economic elements that influence the overall patterns of media performance (Klaehn, 2005). However, this is not a conspiracy theory of media behavior; instead, at the outset of Manufacturing Consent, Herman and Chomsky (1988 p. xii) emphasized that the model presents a "free market analysis of mainstream media, 'with the results largely being the outcome of the working of market forces'". Notably, the model challenges commonly held notions that media are liberal and dedicated to the public interest. Instead, it suggests that the structural contexts in which news discourses are produced are such that the media are



predisposed to serve propaganda functions within capitalist, liberal-democratic societies (Mullen & Klaehn, 2010).

The model revealed that even though it is evident that the media can be controlled and influenced in autocratic or totalitarian countries, the same can be said of democratic countries where the media are private and formal censorship is absent (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), this is particularly true in cases where the media is highly competitive, periodically uncovers and highlights misconduct by corporations and government, and assertively positions itself as a champion of free speech and the broader community interest. The media does not openly recognize the limited range of these criticisms or the substantial differences in resource control that affect accessibility to a privately owned media system and how it operates and performs.

Herman and Chomsky advanced that, among other functions the media serve, they propagandize on behalf of the powerful societal interests that control and finance them (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The model suggests that the media and the elites disseminate propaganda by filtering information through five filters: that is, the ownership, size, and profit orientation of mainstream media; the advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; the reliance on the media on information provided by these primary sources and agents of power; the organized flak that represents a mechanism of social control; and the various ideological forces, which may be deployed and adapted to correspond to elite interests when required (Herman & Chomsky, 1988 p. 2; Klaehn 2002, 2003, 2005).

All these filters culminate together to restrict the absolute power of the media in a democratic state by sieving the raw news through their net, "leaving only the clean residue fit to print" (Herman & Chomsky, 1998, p. 2). These filters clarify what constitutes noteworthy in the first place, fix the premises for discourse and interpretation, and explain the rationale behind the methods of what might be considered propaganda campaigns (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

For the purpose of this paper, researcher analyze the first three filters: ownership, advertising, and reliance of the media on the government for information, and how these filters influence the dissemination of COVID-19 information through the media in Ghana.

The Media Ownership Filter

Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that the concentration of media ownership profoundly influences the selection, framing, and portrayal of news stories. They revealed that one significant way that media influence the news is due to their stratified nature. This is termed the organization of "media in tier" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 4). Herman and Chomsky point out that "the media are tiered, with the top tier, as measured by prestige, resources, and outreach. Along with the government, this top tier defines the news agenda and supplies much of the national and international news to the lower tiers of the media and the general public" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 4). This is the exact reflection of what happens in Ghana. For instance, in Ghana, few major conglomerate media houses influence and sharpen the public discourse due to their reach, access, and resources. This includes the multimedia group with six radio brands, four television brands, two online assets, and international affiliations, and the Despite media with a maximum reach consisting of four media brands, one TV station, local and international affiliation, and a vibrant one online.

These private media houses and the state media, including the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and Graphic Communication group, wield much influence as many other media, especially local media, rely on them to get news content; as a result, news emanating from them is deemed accurate. Again, as Herman and Chomsky (1988) posit, the diversification of the media contributes significantly to exerting control over the editorial processes and the overall direction of the media organization. They argue that this sharpens their focus on profit seeking through advertising revenues and increases audience, framing their narrative to meet this goal.

Advertising Filter

The symbiotic relationship between media outlets and advertisers plays a crucial role here, where dependence on advertising revenue might influence media content to skew favorably towards advertisers' interests, potentially compromising editorial independence and objectivity. Herman and Chomsky (1988) noted that the overreliance of the media on the advertisers for funds to lubricate the company's wheels often



makes them fall victim to the whims and dictates of the advertisers. When making advertising choices, advertisers evaluate both the size and the composition of the readership of the different outlets. The profile of the readers matters because advertisers want to target readers who are likely to be receptive to their advertising message (Geylani & Yildirim, 2012).

Therefore, Herman and Chomsky (1988) mention that media outlets are highly aware of the significance of capturing an audience and securing one that exhibits a desirable level of purchasing power. To this end, they introduced programs and print or air news materials that reflect the ideas of an advertising agency. The advertiser chooses selectively among programs based on their principles. This power of the advertising agency stems from the fact that they buy and pay for the program. "They are patrons who provide the media subsidy" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 16). As such, the media compete for their patronage by developing programs that benefit the goals and restrain from engaging in conversation, threatening, and hating the advertisers for fear of withdrawal. According to My Joy Online (2009), a case in point is when an Accra-based radio called Citi FM in Ghana had all her rice advertisements stripped off by rice import companies after they launched a campaign to consume locally produced rice. This puts into perspective the significant power advertisers have over the media and how the play of this power influences the media's content.

The influence of advertisers on television content is rooted in a straightforward dynamic: they finance and purchase the programs, effectively subsidizing the media and acting as its sponsors. Consequently, media entities vie for their favor, employing specialized teams tasked with cajoling advertisers and justifying how their programming aligns with the advertisers' goals.

Sourcing Mass-Media Filter

The Propaganda Model also underscores the strategic sourcing that media engages in, which is predominantly aligned with institutional powers. Dominant sources such as government agencies, corporate sectors, and elite think tanks often become the primary arbiters of information disseminated to the public. According to Mullen and Klaehn (2010), corporate media see them as experts and 'authorized knowers'; their opinions are often accepted without scrutiny. Herman & Chomsky (1988) argue that mass media outlets often present themselves as neutral conduits of information, striving for an aura of objectivity that not only appeases their audience but also shields them against allegations of bias and potential defamation lawsuits. They rely on sources that appear unwavering in accuracy to maintain this stance.

From a financial perspective, tapping into seemingly trustworthy sources mitigates the hefty expenses of in-depth investigative journalism. After all, verifying information from less credible origins, or those likely to stir controversy, demands painstaking scrutiny and a considerable investment of resources. They assert that the public information machinery of large-scale government entities and corporate behemoths is extensive, providing a continuous and accessible stream of content for the press. This ensures that these elite sources often have a direct pipeline to media exposure.

Herman and Chomsky (1988) assert that the media's pursuit of news is relentless and voracious, driven by unyielding deadlines and the necessity to feed an ever-hungry news cycle. The practicalities of journalism mean that news organizations do not have the luxury of stationing reporters and camerapersons at every potential hotspot for breaking news. Economic pragmatism thus compels them to deploy their resources strategically, focusing on locales where history has shown that news - complete with its tantalizing leaks and whispers consistently bubbles to the surface, ready for the taking.

Literature Review

The literature review explores the conceptual framework of information and misinformation and its prevalence during the peak of COVID-19 and government communication and media.

COVID-19 Information and Misinformation

The literature presents various perspectives on misinformation and its implications, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Karlova (2018), misinformation may include incorrect, uncertain, vague, or ambiguous information open to several interpretations. Lim (2020) takes a step further, suggesting that misinformation is not just misleading but also crafted to benefit the sender, combining falsehoods, omissions, out of context data, sensational headlines, or clickbait to influence the reader's view.

Historically, misinformation has been an issue during pandemics, and the case with COVID19 is no



different. Fake news, conspiracy theories, and misreported facts have been widespread (Larsson et al., 2003). Such misinformation can stem from traditional media outlets, through journalists who may not fully grasp the scientific details or receive incorrect information, sometimes leading to exaggerated reports to capture audience attention. Social media platforms have played a significant role in spreading misinformation regarding COVID-19's origins, methods of prevention, and cures often-overriding credible health advice (Darkwa et al., 2024; Hartely et al., 2020). The spread of misinformation can harm public health, as misinformation can lead to health-damaging behavior and adopting practices that can exacerbate the spread of the virus (Tasnim et al., 2020).

Highlighting the seriousness of this issue, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus classified the spread of misinformation through social media during the COVID-19 crisis as an "infodemic" in February 2020, a term becoming increasingly common in pandemic lexicon (Hu et al., 2020; Hua & Shaw, 2020; Medford et al., 2020; Pulido et al., 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). The WHO (2020) defines an infodemic as an excessive amount of information, often incorrect or misleading, during an outbreak, leaving the public confused due to contradictory messages and unsure of protective actions (Cinelli et al., 2020; Lapoe et al., 2022). Karlova and Fisher (2013) argued that people inherently like to share information, particularly news, regardless of its veracity, often disseminating it through their social circles, allowing misinformation and disinformation to proliferate rapidly.

There was widespread misinformation, myths, and disinformation about the disease in Ghana. Common misconceptions included beliefs that the virus could not endure in hot temperatures, that black people were immune, that faith or certain practices like consuming garlic or inhaling steam could protect against infection, or that only the elderly were at risk (AbuBonsrah et al., 2023; Adom, 2020; Tabong & Segtub, 2021). Additionally, there were conspiracy theories regarding the virus's origins, such as being a biological weapon or linked to 5G networks, and mistrust in official reports regarding the number of cases and recoveries (Tabong & Segtub, 2021). Abu-Bonsrah et al. (2023) found that such skepticism diminished trust in official information and reduced adherence to safety protocols.

Government and Media

The role of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant, serving as a primary conduit for distributing information to curb the spread of the virus (Boateng et al., 2024b). Nyarko et al. (2021) recognize the media's essential position, highlighting both traditional and digital platforms' efforts in sharing crucial COVID-19 messages, particularly during lockdowns when remote communication has been vital. Continuing this sentiment, Antwi-Boasiako et al. (2020) acknowledge that media organizations predominantly situated in Accra, offered widespread coverage via live broadcasts, news pieces, and social media initiatives. Despite the surge in digital media, radio and TV have maintained their status as primary sources for health information dissemination in Ghana.

How Ghana's media collect and dispense information hinges on their operational norms, heavily relying upon trustworthy sources (Darkwa, 2024; Hasty, 2005). Evidence from research, including the work of Smith and Tietaah (2017), points to a tendency within Ghanaian journalism to quote government officials over health experts or scientists preferentially. In line with this finding, a study by Appiah et al. (2015) confirmed there is little inclusion of experts' opinions in their newsgathering.

The issue of credibility extends beyond source selection. Ghanaian journalists strive to embed integrity in their reporting by verifying facts. Nevertheless, challenges persist due to the influx of false or misleading content from digital outlets (Darkwa & Acquah, 2023; Mensah, 2021). Data from Afro barometer surveys reflect increasing public apprehension regarding online misinformation and a perception that various actors - including news media, political figures, government officials, and social media users—contribute significantly to such misinformation (Conroy-Krutz et al., 2021).

Adenkule et al. (2022) commented on Ghana's specific health and risk communication context during the pandemic, observing the detrimental influence of disinformation promulgated by authoritative figures, including journalists and government officials. This reality implies that media influence extends into the realm of misinformation dissemination.

Journalists' dependence on official sources for information, especially those from state media, is



highlighted by Hasty (2005) and can be critical during health crises. Further, Antwei Boasiako et al. (2020) mention the President's televised addresses as a key channel to communicate government actions in response to the pandemic. This close relationship between media and government sources can be problematic if trust in the state is wavering. Pandemics inherently stir fear, anxiety, and confusion, intensifying the quest for information (Boateng et al., 2024a). When governmental transparency is questioned, misinformation and disinformation are more likely to flourish, underscoring the intricate interplay between the government, the media, and the public during times of crisis.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate how COVID-19 information was portrayed in the Ghanaian media, specifically through the "Newsfile" program on the Multimedia channel. The methodology is structured as follows:

Selection of Media Source

The "Newsfile" program was chosen for its significance in discussing national issues and its wide reach during the pandemic. This program serves as a crucial platform for public discourse in Ghana, making it an appropriate choice for analyzing media representations related to COVID-19.

Data Collection

A systematic method is utilized to select relevant episodes from the "Newsfile" program, focusing on broadcasts from March 2020, when the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Ghana, through subsequent months. This time frame allows for examining how media messaging evolved in response to the pandemic.

Content Analysis

The core of the methodology revolves around qualitative content analysis, which will involve systematically reviewing the selected broadcast segments. Key elements of the content analysis include identifying recurring themes related to government communications about COVID-19, such as public health announcements, governmental policies, and public health campaigns.

The study assesses the framing of COVID-19 information, looking at how the media presented issues such as the severity of the virus, preventive measures, and the societal impact of the pandemic. Particular attention is given to instances of misinformation circulated during the pandemic, exploring how the media addressed or failed to address these inaccuracies. The examination will include how misinformation was framed and the potential consequences of these narratives on public understanding.

Application of the Theoretical Framework

The study utilizes Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model to guide the analysis. This model provides a lens through which to understand the structural biases in media production and how they can influence public discourse. The analysis will specifically consider how various factors, such as media ownership, advertising reliance, and sourcing from official government communications, shaped the portrayal of COVID-19 in the media.

Thematic Interpretation

Following the content analysis, the study synthesizes the findings to delineate key insights regarding the media's role in shaping public perceptions of COVID-19. This thematic interpretation aims to draw connections between government messaging, media framing, and audience reception, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between information dissemination and public discourse during the health crisis.

To sum up, the methodology focuses on qualitative content analysis of the "Newsfile" program. It applies a theoretical framework to analyze how COVID-19 information was constructed and communicated to the public, aiming to highlight the media's influence on public understanding and response during the pandemic. The next section looks at the study's discussion and analysis.

Discussion and Analysis

Ghanaian Media and the Start of the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Propaganda Model

This section presents a discussion and analysis of the paper. This will consider the trend of COVID-19 information and disinformation dissemination by media communication.

Media and Covid-19 Information Dissemination



It is well recognized that the media is enormously influential in public responses to health issues. The mass media - print, television, radio, and internet - has an unparalleled reach as a communication mechanism (Boateng & Darkwa, 2021a; Gunther, 1998). This was evident in Ghana as the media house dedicated massive resources, airtime, and print space to disseminate information on COVID-19. For instance, media houses like Citi TV, Joy News, and TV3 commenced new and special programs, including Covid-19 Special Coverage, Covid -19 Public Education campaign, and Covid-19 Pandemic, respectively.

These programs were dedicated to informing the public of the vast effects associated with the pandemic, including the daily update of the recorded COVID-19 cases, the safety measures professed by the Ghana Health Service, and the government policies and measures enacted to control or stiffen the spread of the virus. These programs, among many others by the media, promoted a plethora of information on COVID-19. The media in Ghana had the freedom to discuss or report on every aspect of COVID-19 issues in any manner they deemed right, with no actual formulated policies limiting the extent to which they could go. For instance, *Newsfile's* COVID-19 communication widely ranged from the economic impact of the pandemic to information on the vaccine and the government policy of the pandemic management, among many other issues.

The panel for this discussion was mostly made of medical and health experts, government officials, and think tanks who expressed their opinions on the issue discussed, demystifying some preconceived notions by the public and educating the public to be armed with the appropriate information.

For example, the March 22, 2021, episode of the program, entitled "Conflicting information about the safety of the AstraZeneca jabs, paneled medical and public health experts to solicit their views on the effectiveness and efficacious of the AstraZeneca vaccine in order to encourage the public to take the jab and minimize the spread of the virus in Ghana. This was done generally to demystify the myth, which says that one can have a life-threatening side effect if he or she is injected with the AstraZeneca vaccine. This was demystified during the program by Kwame Sarpong Asiedu, head of safety and monitoring at the Food and Drugs Authority, who mentioned that "the AstraZeneca vaccine was pushed back because big manufacturing companies wanted to increase their prices, and looking at the low price of AstraZeneca should case such a thing happen, the world market would tilt towards

AstraZeneca" (*Newsfile*, 2021,8:15). He then assured Ghanaians that "Ghana his outfit has not identified any safety issues with AstraZeneca so far, and researcher have to restate that we have the best system to monitor the safety of AstraZeneca. He mentioned that "Ghana's vaccination monitoring system can be compared to any system worldwide, and it will meet standards. For instance, between 2019 and 2020, after reviewing Ghana's regulatory system and function in the safety regulation of medicinal products, the WHO concluded that Ghana's system is at a maturity level, and this means Ghana can detect safety issues of any vaccine product," he added (*Newsfile*, 2021,7:31).

Richmond Adusa-Poku, the CEO of Garrison Pharmacy, stated on the show that "myths surrounding the vaccines are real. Some think it is just water in the syringe; others think the time frame within which the vaccines were manufactured was too fast and may cause health issues because it may not have met standards. However, researcher must say that all of these are myths and hold no truth in science. This is because the advanced technology and the financial resources the West has channeled into creating the vaccine significantly contributed to cutting the time. In the scientific world, all the steps taken to ensure the vaccines were safe were done around the clock; hence, it is safe to take" (*Newsfile*, 2021, 13:52).

Even though the debate on *Newsfile* tried to address people's misbelief about the vaccine by mentioning and refuting some of the unsubstantiated claims some people had, it failed to allow for a broader spectrum of discussion as it only featured individuals who agree to the taking of the vaccine. This is because, as Chomsky (1989) highlighted, there has been much debate over the media during this period, but it does not deal with the problem of "democratizing the media" and freeing them from the constraints of state and private power. As evident, the panelists were government employees and pharmaceutical company owners and were allowed by the media to communicate their opinions. It can be concluded from Chomsky (1989) that the media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly.



Even though the media tried to be objective by interviewing medical and public health experts on the pertinent issues regarding the management of the COVID-19 crisis in Ghana, one keen element researcher observed was the involvement of politicians and people affiliated with political parties were mostly engaged by the media houses as it was typical of *Newsfile* to discuss issues of the pandemic. This discussion on the pandemic mostly leads to a polarized discourse. To illustrate this, an episode titled "Should Schools Remain Closed or Open Amidst COVID-19" on *Newsfile* featured two prominent political figures from the two major parties, namely Dr. Bernard Oko Boye of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), who also serves as the deputy minister of health and Mr. Sam George of the New Democratic Party (NDC) who is a member of Parliament.

During this debate, Dr. Bernard Oko Boye of the NPP, the incumbent party, was for reopening schools, stating data that indicated that school reopening was safe. Mr. Sam George of the opposition party was emphatically against the view expressed by the opponent based on his data, too.

In all, we have total cases of about 1,26-005 with an 85% recovery rate and 139 deaths, which comes to a mortality of 0.5% rate, meaning that for every 1000 COVID-19 cases in Ghana, we can lose five people; Nigeria is doing 2.25 percent which means that for 1000 cases they lose 22 while the United States is 14% of mortality meaning they 40 deaths for every 1000 cases. Looking at this data, our situation, as I always put it, is inspiring. We are doing our best to keep people safe and protect lives. It is therefore important to mention that we have taken measures and made preparations before the school's reopening. First, we invited proposals from all the stakeholders that have something to do with education on reopening. These stakeholders include the Vice-chancellors- Ghana, the Ghana National Association of Graduate Teachers, the National Association of Teachers, the Parent Association, and the Civil Society. All these bodies shared with us views and opinions on the reopening. And as a government, after these details, we harmonize to get the best measure for the situation at hand; that is how we can reopen the schools safely. Beyond this, we had pre-school conditions, which must be met before the reopening. These include, among others, the fumigation of 18,667 educational facilities. Also, we have distributed logistics such as nose marks and Veronica buckets to all the schools nationwide, and these are to aid in protecting the kids from any contraction. From this analysis, the genuine question is why we have measures in place. What if we record cases?" Dr. Benard Oko-Boye (*Newsfile*, 2020, 5:20-6:52).

Mr. Sam George, on the other hand, refuted his claim by saying the following.

"Speaking about the protocols put in place, I am sure Dr. Benard Oko-Boye will agree that the Veronica buckets in themselves could be an element to the spread of the virus if not managed well. Again, he (Dr. Benard Oko-Boye) refers to the distribution of facemasks; we were told by the public relations officer of the Ghana Health Service that these masks were M95. However, the evidence clearly does not support the truth, and everybody knows it was a cloth mask. As we are aware, after washing this mask a number of times, it reduces its efficiency, given the strength of the virus. Also, we have the Children's Act, which encourages the government to protect the children's best interests. Are we saying that the best interest of children today is to subject them to this mental toucher? Seeing, for example, the KNUST High School students having to hold their colleagues till death is something that should not happen to anyone. The point must be made that the legislation put in place to govern the management of the pandemic, specifically regarding education, use the operative word "may" and not "shall." From this, I found it confusing that the government is forcing our children to attend school." "Even though the government claims it is making this decision based on the experts' advice and stakeholders, if you are to listen to any of the experts, you will be complaining about the government's decision" Mr. Sam George (*Newsfile*, 2020, 24:27-26:01).

This clearly underlines the challenges faced by the media in Ghana when attempting to strike a balance between objectivity and the influence of political perspectives during the COVID19 crisis. Despite efforts to include medical and public health experts, the media's engagement with political figures led to a polarized discourse. This confirms Herman and Chomsky's (1988) assertion that media content is shaped, in part, by powerful societal forces, which include government and political entities. The model posits that news content is filtered through a series of structural biases that serve the interests of elite groups, such as political parties and their affiliates. The involvement of political figures like Dr. Bernard Oko Boye and Mr. Sam George showcases another layer of the Propaganda Model: the media's tendency to offer platforms to those



representing the ideologies of established power structures (political parties, in this case). When such figures dominate the conversation, they overshadow the technical or scientific information that might be more critical to effectively understanding and managing the health crisis.

The Narrowing Effect: How Media Debate Constrains Public Opinion

A prominent feature of COVID-19 communication by the media in Ghana was heavily centered on government communication and the government information apparatus. The media framed COVID-19 information largely based on the President's address to the nation and the Ministries of government, especially the Health Ministry. As evident on *Newsfile*, almost all episodes of discussion on the pandemic were focused on communication emanating from the government. For instance, the episode "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Time for a Lockdown", aired on March 28, 2020, discussed the government lockdown policies and their pros and cons throughout the segment.

Even though the resource persons present for discussion, Professor Alfred Edwin Yawson, physician, public health consultant, and academic, and Dr. Patrick Aboagye, Director-General, Ghana Health Service, were public health practitioners, which stipulate that their opinion on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic reflected as an expert, it was constricted within the President's pronouncement about the management of the illness. They often referred to the following statement by the education minister at the time, Dr. Matthew Opoku Prempeh: "If you stop, the virus stops; if you move, the virus moves. Your front door is the frontline of the fight against coronavirus; if you cross it, you and your family will likely be infected, so please stop."

A case in point was an extensive discussion on sensitizing the public and the need to wear personal protective equipment to safeguard themselves from contradicting the virus and curbing or reducing its spread. In the address of these persons, the majority of their references are confined within the communication made by the presidents. Another episode, "COVID-19", and "New the Voters' Roll" (Part.1) and (2) on March 18, 2020, also discussed the government support for the Electoral Commission's to commence new voters register and other titled COVID-19 testing at airports aired on February 13, 2023, also discussed the government measures put in place to safeguard traveling after lifting the ban. This evidence points to the frequency at which government communication influenced the frame of discussion of the show (*Newsfile*, 2020).

The above examples reflect the Ghanaian media landscape during the COVID-19 crisis, characterized by information dissemination predominantly shaped by the governmental narrative. In Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, this phenomenon aligns with the third filter 'sourcing' which emphasizes the media's dependence on official and authoritative information sources. Herman and Chomsky (1988) state that economic necessity and logistical factors determine the media's reliance on government, business, and expert sources for news content. These sources are seen as credible and authoritative, providing a steady stream of information ready for dissemination.

The sourcing filter suggests that the media often act as conduits for these powerful entities rather than as independent bodies that challenge or critically assess the information provided by them. Using the Propaganda Model to evaluate this phenomenon allows us to consider the implications of such a media approach. It highlights the lack of a critical perspective that might stem from an overreliance on official narratives. Although sourcing information from government officials is practical and may be seen as objective, it does bear the risk of presenting a narrow view shaped by the interests of those in power, possibly at the expense of a more diverse public discourse.

Conclusion

This research analyzes a case study of COVID-19 material distributed by Ghanaian media, specifically through *Newsfile* on the Multimedia channel, providing a persuasive interpretation through the framework of Herman and Chomsky's "Propaganda Model." The media's significant influence on public perception during health crises is undeniable. In Ghana, the reaction was prompt and significant, featuring dedicated slots for COVID-19 coverage, illustrating the media's capacity for extensive influence and public enlightenment. These media initiatives sought to deliver precise health facts, dispel falsehoods, and tackle public apprehensions through expert testimony. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, media output conforms to official narratives, consistent with the sourcing filter described by Herman and Chomsky, which restricts the media's liberty to



promote narratives that vary from state or strong interests.

Furthermore, the media's propensity to engage with political figures, as evidenced in polarized debates on programs like *Newsfile*, indicates a possible liaison between media and political interests. This engendered a polarized public discourse that frequently overshadowed data-driven discussions with partisan opinions. Such politicization of the pandemic discourse corroborates Herman and Chomsky's assertion that media tend to serve and amplify the messages of state and corporate powers, even in a democratic country.

These findings highlight the challenges when media prioritize content from authoritative sources over a more pluralistic range of opinions and analyses. The prevalence of government-centered discourse and the consequential marginalization of dissenting viewpoints, alongside the platform provided to political figures, poses significant questions regarding the democratization of the media and the free flow of information.

Although the coverage of the COVID-19 epidemic by Ghanaian media clearly had an educational value, the analysis based on Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model reveals a clear trend whereby political and governmental narratives significantly shaped media content, so restricting the range of debate and maybe the public's access to a complete awareness of the crisis. This emphasizes the important requirement of a media ecosystem that is both critical and independent, able of evaluating and diversifying the streams of information, especially in the case of public health emergency, to guarantee a well-informed population.

Conflict of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

The author extends sincere gratitude to colleagues at the University of Maine for their valuable insights and recommendations that contributed to the development of this paper.

Funding

This research received no funding from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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