

**UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**

**MEDIA COVERAGE OF COVID-19 IN GHANA: A STUDY OF SELECTED  
RADIO STATIONS IN THE CAPE COAST MUNICIPALITY**



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**190014296**



**A dissertation in the Department of Strategic Communication,  
School of Communication and Media Studies, submitted to the  
school of Graduate Studies, in partial fulfilment**

**of the requirements for award of the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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**November, 2021**

## DECLARATION

### STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, **Elizabeth Elegba**, declare that this dissertation, with the exception of quotation and references contained in published works which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my own work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole for another degree elsewhere.

**SIGNATURE:**.....

**DATE:**.....

### SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this work was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for supervision of dissertation as laid down by the University of Education, Winneba.

**NAME OF SUPERVISOR:** DR. GIFTY APPIAH-AGYEI

**SIGNATURE:**.....

**DATE:**.....

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## **DEDICATION**

Special dedication to my grandmother, Mrs. Joana Markin of blessed memory, for all the sacrifices that she made all through my life.

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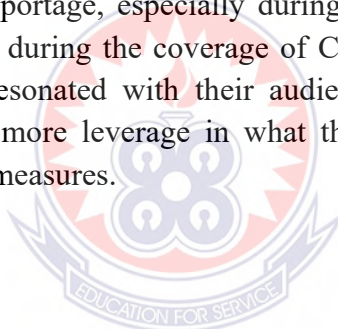
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## ABSTRACT

This study assessed media coverage of COVID-19 in Ghana by focusing on two selected radio stations (Kingdom FM and Radio Central) in the Central Region. The study sought to identify the sources of information on COVID-19 shared by the selected radio stations, the frames used by the selected radio stations in the coverage of COVID-19 and the challenges encountered by journalists of Central Radio and Kingdom FM during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the agenda setting and framing theories through a multiple case study, data was gathered from purposively sampled journalists and editors through structured interviews. Data obtained are subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that journalists relied on multiple sources of information, namely, medical experts, government officials, social media, external media organisations and community members. It also emerged that journalists at the selected radio stations used the refutation of misconception frame, global pandemic frame, and the war frame in covering the COVID-19 pandemic. This study further revealed that journalists found it challenging to appropriately report issues surrounding the pandemic in a way that invoked public action without causing fear and panic. They also did not have the training and resources for effective reportage, especially during the first wave of the pandemic. The study concludes that during the coverage of COVID-19, journalists used words and terminologies that resonated with their audiences. In doing so, they allowed themselves considerably more leverage in what they asked of the public, such as compliance with harsher measures.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter provides an introduction to the study, focusing on the background, statement of the problem, objectives and research questions. It also outlines the significance, the delimitation of the study and the organization of the entire research work.

#### **1.1 Background to the Study**

The mass media play major roles in informing and educating citizens about topical social issues including disease outbreaks. As a result of this, the media is expected to provide information and education about the COVID-19 pandemic (Hsiang et al., 2020). Media reportage of the COVID-19 epidemic in Africa are important for preventing the spread of the disease and for ensuring that citizens understand the safety protocols to observe amidst the global health crises (Gabore, 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic is certainly not the first global media disease, and as such it is by no means the foremost disease to have a strong media component in its construction and representation (Marsh, 2020). Throughout history, diseases have long been mediated by presentation in the media. For instance, cholera was a key disease in terms of press attention (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). There are some diseases (bubonic plague, small-pox and malaria) that have killed more people than COVID-19 but few have attracted such a range of media coverage--from religious periodicals, radical newspapers, literary press, medical journals and general scientific papers. By this proposition, COVID-19 then, is not the first media disease in the sense

of definition and presentation by the media; but it has had a very high media profile (Hsiang et al., 2020).

According to Jenkins et al., (2018) the perceptions and misperceptions of AIDS in Africa has placed AIDS in the context of the longstanding misrepresentation of Africa by the Western media. Jenkins et al., (2018) made parallels between previous scholarly works on colonial misunderstandings and misrepresentations of tuberculosis (TB) and syphilis and the simplification and overgeneralizations of AIDS in Africa (Lidskog; et al., 2020). During disease outbreaks, the news media influence global and local interactions between people, societies, and governments through the production of place images to inform and educate the citizenry (Chadwick, Linders, 2012; & May, 2003).

COVID-19 is a global catastrophe like no other because of the conflicting and contested viewpoints that have become associated with it. (Hussien, 2021) These conflicting issues affect not only by news coverage, but also the health, economic, personal, social, cultural and security interventions that must be put in place to check the spread of the disease (Castiglioni & Gaj, 2020). Media is one of the main spaces where these meanings, interventions and contestations are tabled and wrestled. This space is provided by the media through performances, visual arts, video, films, print media and broadcasting (Seraphin, 2021). Mainly through the media there is a possibility of understanding the trends, contradictions and different conceptualizations of the disease and those affected by it. As a news topic, the COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health story, but also one about identity, economics, politics, justice and power at multiple scales (Lidskog et al., 2020).

As the main source of public opinion in society, the media has a very central role to play in raising awareness, education and focusing on what is being done and needs to be done (Castells, 2007). In the case of Africa, the extent to which the images of the continent espoused by the media under the umbrella of the COVID-19 epidemic create and perpetuate certain cognitive images, imaginary landscapes, metaphors and realities of the typical identity of Africa (Castiglioni & Gaj, 2020). The media helps in creating a popular understanding of the environmental reality by producing place images (Jenkins et al., 2018).

In contemporary societies, the media greatly impacts the issues policymakers and citizens think about, the relative importance they ascribe to these issues, as well as the ways they perceive the people and places affected by these issues (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Influential newspapers, radio station networks, television networks and internet sites serve as a forum in which issues of the day that affect people and places are shaped and debated (Castells, 2007). Consequently, understanding the nature of a critical issue that is simultaneously private, public and global such as the COVID-19 requires an analysis of mass media coverage.

The Corona Virus and its multitudinous health implication in Africa is an amalgamation of complex causes, effects and realities that are biological, socio-economic, political, cultural and geographical (Lidskog et al., 2020). Hence, the appreciation and understanding of this complexity requires serious public, policy, and scientific debate. This debate takes place through, by, with and for the media. However, the media operate in concert with developmental, governmental, biomedical, research, pharmaceutical, entrepreneurial, and philanthropic and other personal entities all of which clamor for attention and resources within the threatening

pandemic context in Africa (Agbozo & Jahn, 2021). Chakraborty and Maity (2020) note that whilst media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic is welcome, how the media represents the pandemic, or the nature of coverage has both practical and policy implications. An Analysis of media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore imperative.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Globally, the coronavirus, which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City was initially reported to the WHO on December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.

On February 11, 2020, the coronavirus Study Group of the international committee on taxonomy Viruses issued a statement announcing an official designation for the novel virus: severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Mangenello et al., (2020) noted the urgency to communicate information in a timely manner during pandemics. Beyond the need for timely information is the need for credible health communication, one in which citizens can believe, rely on and act upon. This is where traditional media becomes a useful public sphere to engage with the audience and discuss the way forward in terms of progress made, challenges encountered and plans in place to defeat the virus with concern members of the public (Hart et al., 2020). For Mahon (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic generated an increase in news reports, created an untruth, and thus bred a challenge for citizens in terms of accurate news in the midst of an unknown threat.

Globally, a number of studies have been conducted on COVID-19 since it emerged in 2019. KIM, et al., (2020), investigated how COVID-19 has and has not changed the way people work. Bateman and Ross, (2020), also discussed why COVID-19 has been especially harmful to woman.

On February 14, 2020, Africa confirmed its first COVID-19 case in Egypt and the first case in the Saharan was confirmed in Nigeria at the end of February. Okoye and Shiri (2021), looked at content analysis of news articles in East Africa. They used the framing theory to analyze dimensions being conveyed in the coverage of COVID-19 in Kenya and Tanzania. Specifically, this analysis focused on multiple uses of frames by the two newspapers with respect to context, basic information, treatment information, medical background, research etc.

As part of its 2020 Misinfodemic Report on COVID-19 in emerging economies, Africa Check (2020) reported evidence of COVID-19 related misinformation circulated via social media in Africa.

Tabong and Segtub (2021), from the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, School of Public Health, University of Ghana looked at Misconceptions and Politics of COVID-19 on social media. Their study concluded that, COVID-19 misconceptions and misinformation are widespread and cover the course of the condition. These myths necessitate culturally sensitive health communication strategies that take into account local perceptions of COVID-19 in order to tackle the circulation of misconceived message about the pandemic in Ghana.

Quakyi et al., (2021), also did a study looking at Ghana's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They concluded in their study that, Ghana's response is constrained by

limited resources and inadequate global cooperation to fight the pandemic, which are partly responsible for the challenges in policy implementation.

In Ghana, much attention has been drawn to the role of the media in fighting the pandemic amid restrictions on physical movement and physical contact.

Although several evidences from literature indicate that works have been done on the media and COVID-19 in Ghana, not much has been done on how the media specially radio, covered the COVID-19 pandemic. This study therefore examines the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in two selected radio stations in the Cape Coast Municipality in the Central Region of Ghana in terms of sources of information, frames used and challenges encountered by journalist during the coverage of the pandemic.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The study generally seeks to investigate media (radio) coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Cape Coast Municipality of the Central Region of Ghana.

Specifically, the study sought:

1. To identify the sources of information on COVID-19 shared by the selected radio stations in the Cape Coast Municipality.
2. To examine the frames used by the selected radio stations in the coverage of COVID-19 stories in the Cape Coast Municipality.
3. To ascertain the challenges encountered by journalists of the selected radio stations during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The following research questions guided that study.

1. What are the sources of information on COVID-19 shared by the selected radio stations in the Cape Coast Municipality?
2. What are the frames used by the selected radio stations in the coverage of COVID-19 stories in the Cape Coast Municipality?
3. What challenges are encountered by journalists of selected radio stations during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The rationale of this study is based on the argument that media representation of the Corona Virus pandemic in Africa is of chief importance to the advancement of knowledge, cure, and prevention of the disease. The findings of this study are beneficial for understanding journalistic routines and challenges during pandemics, which has implications for the training of journalists. As Ghana's media landscape continues to evolve, the outcomes of this study have significant policy implications. This study is intended to meet the challenges of reporting on a pandemic with unknown consequences. It also aims at serving as an opportunity for reflections on the changes and challenges of journalism in the post COVID era. It aims at identifying the fake news pattern in the process of disinformation about COVID-19. More so, available literature on media coverage of COVID-19 and its associated impact in Ghana is limited and hence, this study will add to the existing literature and provide insights into health and the media discourse in Ghana in relation to pandemic



## **1.6 Scope of the Study**

The study is limited to only the broadcast media, specifically radio. It further focuses on two radio stations within the Cape Coast Municipality. These are Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (Radio Central), and privately-owned Kingdom FM.

## **1.7 Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research objectives and questions. Chapter Two presents the theoretical and empirical literature as well as the conceptual framework of the study. This chapter examines the perspectives and theoretical approaches on media coverage and reviews relevant literature in order to position the study in a broader framework on COVID-19. Chapter Three discusses the methodology employed for the study. It encompasses the research approach, research design, data collection methods, sample size and sampling, and methods of data analysis. It further discusses the ethical considerations that will guide the study. Chapter Four discusses and analyzes the data collected from the field. Lastly, Chapter Five presents the summary, recommendations and conclusions of the study.

## **1.8 Summary of the Chapter**

In sum, this chapter highlights the impact of COVID-19 and its associated threats on the health of the global citizenries, with detailed insight from the globe, Africa and Ghana to be specific. It also pointed out governments' intervention in helping raise national concerns on the global pandemic. The chapter again discussed the role of the media in the coverage of COVID-19. It stated the problem, gave the objectives, research objectives, research question, significance of the study, scope of the study and the organization of the entire thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter of the study presents a review of extant literature in relation to the topic under study. The review of literature is organized under thematic areas that reflect the objectives of the study. The themes and issues captured under the literature review include an overview of the COVID-19 situation in Ghana, Media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, Humanitarian radio and journalistic practices during crises and emergencies. The theoretical framework which underpins the study is also discussed.

#### 2.2 The Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

Pandemic is not a terminology to be used lightly, because its misuse can cause unreasonable fear and anxiety among the public. This notwithstanding, biologists, health agencies and the media often seem to be at odds when defining the term – pandemic. The divergence is often because whilst some experts argue that referring to a situation as a pandemic should be based on the explosive transmissibility of the disease, others believe that the severity of infection should rather be considered (Caduff, 2015; Morens et al., 2009).

Despite the divergence of views, there is consensus that a pandemic is the outbreak of an infectious disease which affects a large proportion of the population (Morens et al., 2009). In other words, a pandemic is a very large epidemic. Historically, the world has witnessed several pandemics because as societies evolve, so do diseases. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019 was the first time a coronavirus sparked a pandemic (Liu et al., 2020).

Past pandemics such as the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic, 1968 Pandemic (H3N2 virus), and the 1918 influenza pandemic had different causes. The 1918 pandemic was occasioned by the avian H1N1 virus, a mutation (H3N2) of the deadly avian virus surfaced again in 1968 to cause another global influenza morbidity and mortality (Grais et al., 2003). This was called the 1968 (H3N2 virus) Pandemic. Again in 2009, novel influenza (H1N1) virus emerged leading to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. H1N1 influenza pandemic was also referred to as the ‘Swine Flu pandemic’ (Jester et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is therefore unique and novel because it is the first coronavirus related pandemic.

The coronavirus was first identified at Wuhan, a heavily populated city in mainland China. Currently, it is difficult to think of any part of the world or any aspect of modern life that has not been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Bukari et al., (2021) notes that COVID-19 can easily be described as one of the infectious diseases that has challenged global leaders because in just a space of one year (December 2019 to December 2020) the disease has killed more than 1.3 million people and the death toll is steadily on the rise (Bukari et al., 2021).

COVID-19 is a health crisis with implications for every aspect of human life. As a result, the outbreak of the disease and the actions of the world community have enjoyed significant media prominence. The international and local media continue to disseminate information about the signs, symptoms of the disease as well as the strategies to prevent its spread. Anwar et al., (2020) observed that like physicians battling to save lives, journalists are on the frontline daily, supplying essential life-saving information to their audiences.

Although the media is hailed in one breath for contributing to subdue the pandemic, it is equally blamed for the spread of misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic. Anwar et al., (2020) argue that press coverage of COVID-19 has caused psychological stress among sections of the public. This is partly due to the dramatic and sensational nature in which geographical lockdowns, death rates and extended quarantines were reported in the media.

### **2.3 The COVID-19 situation in Ghana**

Epidemiologists and other scientists are still trying to understand the behaviour of the novel coronavirus, but the high transmissibility of COVID-19 was clear at the onset of the pandemic. The movement of humans, goods and services, therefore, aided the spread of the virus (Kenu et al., 2020). By the end of January 2020, COVID-19 had spread beyond mainland China. The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 outside mainland China were all in Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. In that same month, the disease spread to Washington, the United States of America (USA) and then to Europe and other parts of the world (Taylor, 2021).

The first case of COVID-19 on the African continent was confirmed on February 14 in Egypt, less than a month later the disease was reported in several other African countries including Ghana. The earliest cases of COVID-19 in Ghana were reported on 12 March 2020. The first two cases were imported from Europe, but the virus spread quickly, and within a week there was evidence of community transmission (Kenu et al., 2020).

In the early days (March to April, 2021), most of the COVID-19 cases were in Accra and Kumasi, as a result, both cities were 'locked down' in April to slow down the

spread of the disease. Accra and Kumasi were affected early on because uncontrolled urbanization in both cities had led to population density, and this created conducive conditions for the transmission of infectious diseases like COVID-19. Partial lockdown of cities and other restrictions on movement came at a huge cost to the country. Economic activities came to a halt and livelihoods were seriously endangered (Khoo, 2020).

Other measures taken to reduce the spread of COVID 19 in Ghana included the closure of schools and places of worship (mosques and churches) and a ban on all public gatherings including funerals. The country's land and air borders were also closed and later when they were opened, there was a mandatory quarantine of all travellers arriving from countries with more than 200 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (Kenu et al., 2020; Khoo, 2020).

Despite the quick spread of COVID-19 in Ghana, the situation is better than in Europe and even some other parts of Africa (Soy, 2020). The rate of spread and fatalities recorded in countries like China, Italy, America, Brazil and recently mainland China are disproportionately higher than the rest of the world. The rate of spread and fatalities in Africa is much lower than in the rest of the world except for the high death tolls recorded in Southern Africa and Northern Africa (Soy, 2020). The World Health Organisation's regional office for Africa in a special report in 2020 explained that the relatively low transmissibility of COVID-19 in Africa is because of social and environmental factors. Not least, Africa's population is mostly youthful and more resilient. In addition, the virus does not do well in higher temperatures and arid areas (WHO, 2020).

Public health communication has also contributed to the reduction in the spread of the COVID-19 in Ghana. Both the public and private media have been instrumental in giving out messages on the signs and prevention of the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, as Khoo (2020) observed, there is confusion, and misinformation also continues to spread through the mass media. Although misinformation festers more on social media, the interdependent nature of digital and traditional media makes it easy for online misinformation to find its way into mainstream media.

#### **2.4 Media coverage of COVID-19**

The mass media are indispensable tools in the modern world. They act as important bridge between important sources of authorities, policymakers and the citizens. The role of media in pandemics is even critical because they connect science to society and society to science (Saurabh, 2020). During disease outbreaks, the media is relied on to inform the public but also to shape their perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours. Khoo (2020) opines that media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic affects audiences' beliefs about the origins of the disease and actions to take. People also form opinions about the appropriate policy responses and government responses through the media.

The health, economic and social problems associated with the spread of pandemics generate intense speculation in media. As a result of this, all over the world, the COVID-19 pandemic enjoys a large portion of media coverage compared with other issues. A comparative analysis of television news in Nigeria revealed that both state-owned and private TV stations paid adequate attention to issues of COVID-19 in Nigeria. However, comparatively the coverage of COVID-19 was more frequent and more prominent in the private media than the public media (Apuke & Omar, 2021).

The broadcast media (television and radio) serve as the primary source of critical information to the public in the event of disasters and emergencies. Many people rely on television and radio for information about the pandemic. Reliance on the media increased during lockdowns because when people cannot move out they will rely on the media as their window to the world (Karam, 2020). In developing countries, radio broadcasts are an essential means to share public information, especially with remote populations. Radio is crucial in fighting the pandemic because it is readily accessible, inexpensive, immediate, and widespread (Karam, 2020).

In Brazil, radio was used as a tool to resist disinformation and circumvent digital inequities. In June 2020 when Brazil was experiencing a severe spike in COVID-19 infections, the national administration of President Jair Bolsonaro sought to downplay the situation and to use digital media to disinform the people. Brazilians, especially those in rural areas turned to radio as a tool for self-empowerment and resistance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Belik, 2021).

Digital media also play a role in pandemics. Among other things, the internet, especially social media served as a mechanism through which the international team of WHO received critical alerts alongside communication issued from official channels (Pieri, 2019). However, the fluid and boundless nature of digital media make them difficult to control or regulate. This attribute is significant because some governments seek to stringently control the flow of information during health crises. For example, during the outbreak of SARS in mainland China, the Chinese authorities initially sought to silent any official news coverage of the serious and ill-understood outbreak within China's territories, as well as any news of its lethality and speculations about its possible causes or potential to spread further (Pieri, 2019).

Tarakini et al., (2021) assert that many people with diverse demographic backgrounds relied on social media to acquire information on the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, many of the people who relied on social media were either misinformed or had poor quality information. Some even believed that the disease was man-made as part of biological warfare.

Despite enjoying significant media prominence over a long period, the attention given to COVID-19 is dwindling recently. Pearman et al., (2021) explain that this may be due to fatigue. That is, journalists and other people who work in the media are tired of reporting on the pandemic after more than one year. Other equally pressing issues such as climate change and international security have also taken the attention of journalists away from the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Sources of information (News source)**

News sources are defined as, “the actors who journalists observe or interview including the interviewees who appear on the air or a quoted in magazines, articles and those who supply background information or story suggestions” (Gan 1979, p80). Shoemaker and Reese (1991) suggest that there are in fact two types of sources, direct and indirect. Direct sources are involved with the news event. They are participants insofar as they are subjects of the story itself, or affected by the event in question, either individually or as part of an organization they represent.

Indirect sources are used to add to a narrative. These may be experts qualified to comment on the news events or members of the general public. Key to both these dimension is the idea that sources will convey information to journalists. However, sources not only influence the news agenda but are tools of journalistic interpretation



used to corroborate information contained within a narrative or to frame a particular news event (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991)

According to Shoemaker (1996) and McQuail (1994), there are multitude of factors that tend to condition the acceptance of sources as bona fide by investigative journalists.

## **2.5 Factors influencing media coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The main role of a journalist is to share relevant information with the public. Historically, journalists have followed a set of roles and responsibilities to ensure that they serve the public well. This role of the journalist is particularly important during a global health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, studies (Hackworth, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021) have shown that the work of journalists and the media, in general, is influenced by multiple factors during such critical times.

First, media reportage on the COVID-19 pandemic is dependent on journalists' understanding of the disease. Journalists cannot effectively report on the disease if they don't understand it. As a result of this, journalists have the challenging task of gathering, interpreting and distributing accurate information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hackworth, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021).

Second, newer journalistic practices such as the need to use infographics, social media analysis, predictive journalism, and geolocated data impact media reportage on COVID-19. These practices put more pressure on journalists to be professional and to go beyond just reporting information. Raza et al., (2021) observed that the increasing

dependence on and the popularity of social networking sites has led to high audience involvement and citizen journalism, which have implications for journalistic routines.

Perreault and Perreault (2021) identify the changing news ecology as another factor that influences media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The volatility of social media, speed of information flows, and the need to verify information during the pandemic affected the work of the media. This is because journalists exist as a part of an ecology in which journalism influences and is influenced by the environment. As a result, journalists were working amid an infodemic - a situation where there is abundant or superfluous information making it difficult to make good decisions.

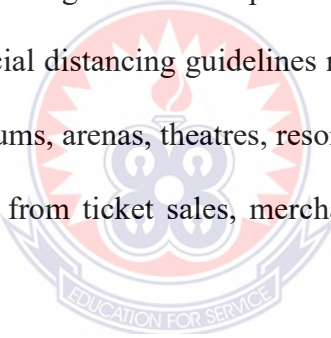
Further, how journalists cover COVID-19 is informed by the larger conversation outside of the field of journalism. Environmental factors such as the availability of expert sources, support from knowledgeable colleagues and editors also affect media reportage on COVID-19. In disaster and crisis communication, journalists serve as a conduit for communications from public officials and experts to the broader public—which is known as the facilitative role of journalism. As a result, the news media is part of a broader communication ecology (Possetti, et al., 2020).

The effective dissemination of information by journalists depends on the overall structure and composition of the media environment. A cross country analysis of news reports on the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the media in the US and UK emphasized more on the economic consequences of the pandemic and measures that individuals can take to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Beltekian et al., (2020) However, the news media in China emphasized government response more than individual personal preventive action. This is because of the difference in the media

system. Whilst the media in the US and UK are free and mostly under private control, mainstream media in China is under government control (Colarossi, 2020).

Media coverage is also influenced by the media's perception of the audience's needs. Journalists have a social responsibility to seek truth, give it context, and provide it to the public so that new conversations and representations can always be present (Hackworth, 2021). In trying to comprehensively serve a community, local media organisations especially conceive of and operate their role depending on how they perceive their audience's needs (Perreault & Perreault, 2021).

Finally, media coverage of the pandemic is influenced by the availability of funds. Unfortunately, many media organisations experienced a dip in revenues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing guidelines resulted in the cancellation of live events nationwide at stadiums, arenas, theatres, resorts, theme parks and other venues, resulting in lost revenues from ticket sales, merchandising, advertising, promotions (Possetti, et al., 2020).



## **2.6 Media response to COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana**

COVID-19 has spread to almost all countries and territories of the world, but nations have reacted differently in their response to this menace. In Ghana, the response to the pandemic has been multifarious. The government, traditional institutions, religious institutions, and the media have all taken some kinds of action to stem the spread of the virus.

The media in Ghana worked closely with the government, academia, and civil society in their response to COVID-19. One example of collaboration between the media and state is what has become known as 'Presidential update on COVID-19'. Since the 12th

of March 2020, a day after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID 19 a pandemic, the president of Ghana has used the presidential updates platform as an opportunity to address citizens on various activities being undertaken to curb the spread of COVID-19. The media: broadcast, press and digital have supported the government by disseminating the presidential updates to citizens.

The media have also served as platforms for stakeholder engagement and public education. The broadcast media especially have allowed their platforms to be used to hold public discussions about the spread of COVID-19 and the safety protocols that can stem the spread. Radio and television stations that broadcast in local Ghanaian languages such as Ewe, Twi and Ga have been especially helpful in this direction (Nkansah, 2020). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were also used to promote COVID-19 consciousness especially among young people who constitute most social media users in Ghana (Segtub & Tabong, 2021).

Many local media house also adjusted their content to suit the exigencies of the pandemic. Some either created programs to provide COVID-19 specific content, others tweaked aspects of existing programs such as primetime news or morning shows to accommodate regular updates on the COVID-19 situation. Social media influencers and digital content creators also used their platforms to promote the COVID-19 prevention protocols (Quakyi et al., 2021).

While commending the media's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Quakyi et al., (2021) also noted that media messages on COVID-19 were not entirely science-driven. Some media messages were backed by little critical examination or in-depth investigation of the issues. Related to this, independent professionals were not given much room to explain issues from a divergent and holistic perspective. Instead, a few

government communicators and so-called renowned experts dominated the media space and controlled the narrative. During the onset of the pandemic in March (the first wave) the media created the perception that the government was on top of the crisis. This gave the citizenry a false sense of security, subsequently fueled laxity, and non-compliance with safety measures. The result was a devastating second wave.

Like Quakyi et al., (2021) and Segtub and Tabong, (2021) also revealed, media messages on the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana were not always reliable, especially on social media. Segtub and Tabong (2021) quipped that people relied on social media to spread myths, false cures, and misinformation about COVID-19. Unfortunately, in some cases, the false stories spread faster than the science-based facts about the disease. Owing to its flexibility, social media now has an unenviable reputation as the place to conduct rumour surveillance.

## **2.7 Journalistic practices during crises and emergencies**

The public's desire for information increases in crises situations. Any time there is a crisis, the public wants to know more about the situation to enable the decision on what action to take. This natural quest for information in uncertain situations obliges journalists to extract interpretations and to refer to multiple sources of information as part of their efforts to satisfy the information needs of their audiences (Sorribes and Rovira, 2011). Consequently, there is reciprocal communication between incident managers and journalists during crises.

Also, Sorribes and Rovira (2011) note that journalists are one of the main actors in risk communication. This is because journalists interact with the affected community, public authorities, industry professionals and technical experts. Risk communication

is an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion about risks among individuals, groups, and institutions. Risk communication considers the effects, content, persuasion, and actors during periods of uncertainty. COVID-19 is a high-risk situation because of its consequences for affected persons and areas. Journalists, therefore, engage in risk communication during crises.

Given the seriousness of crises and emergencies, Sorribes and Rovira (2011) opine that those journalists reporting on COVID-19 must be highly ethical in their coverage. This implies that journalists must not be sensational or dramatic in their reportage. Care must also be taken not to invade the privacy of people affected by the crisis. Sorribes and Rovira (2011) add that there must also be a clear separation between facts and opinion any time journalists report on crises.

Further, Sorribes and Rovira (2011) observed that journalists tend to over-rely on political sources of information at the expense of expert sources during crises. During natural disasters and the terrorist attack in Europe, information sources that were most cited by the media were political. Scientific and technical experts were used minimally by the news media during the crisis. In some instances, Journalists called very little on experts. It must be conceded, however, that in some crises, journalists are compelled to rely on politicians because the experts might want to avoid giving their opinion.

In an analysis of media coverage of humanitarian situations, Ross (2004) noted that journalists are often unable to explain issues in detail because not many journalists specialize in the coverage of the humanitarian crisis and relief stories. This is due, to the episodic nature of crises and the physical and psychological demands this type of reporting demands. In the light of the above, journalists do not dedicate sufficient

personal time to crises and emergencies, they report on the events as they happen and then move on to other issues.

During a crisis, journalists may influence the narrative significantly through their choice of words and frames. For Kotišová (2019), media practices and the actions of journalists during crises must be understood as a complex whole because the actions and inactions of journalists have implications. He further explained that journalists' thoughts and strategic actions have unintended consequences. Thus their choice of words and use of practical devices may lead to the construction of frames and other (desired and undesired) effects.

## **2.8 Challenges associated with reporting in the COVID-19 pandemic**

The impact of COVID-19 on news production and reporting was rapid and sudden. Journalists all over the world face unprecedented challenges in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these challenges are obvious others are subtle but even more insidious. Perhaps the most obvious challenge journalists faced was the need to report the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak accurately and safely. Reporting with accuracy has never been this critical. Amid conflicting information about the pandemic, citizens look up to journalists for the facts and the truth about the situation (Postti et al., 2020). This is a challenge because there is more pressure on journalists to present the news based on scientific facts.

Regarding safety, the instinct of every trained journalist is to go out and get the story whilst it is still breaking, but COVID-19 makes places important limitations on the extent to which journalists can go. The high transmissibility of the COVID-19 virus implies that journalists must take precautions every time they go out to report. In

some countries, certain places such as COVID-19 treatment centers are not accessible to journalists unless they obtain explicit authorization. Journalists must also keep a safe distance and observe other protocols whenever they are out there to gather information from their sources (Radcliffe, 2021).

Further, journalists face the challenge of sifting through COVID-19 myths, false information, and sometimes state propaganda to find the truth. All sources of information have also become potential sources of misinformation. Politicians, government representatives and elected officials are all potential sources of disinformation. To make matters worse, popular social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp have become prolific purveyors of false and misleading information within the media ecosystem. Social media has helped to make disinformation more available and difficult to fight (Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

Postti et al., (2020) the pandemic-induced unemployment, salary cuts, and outlet closures as news organizations took a huge revenue hit particularly during the first phase of the crisis. A global survey of thousand four hundred and six (1,406) journalists, editors and other media workers revealed news organizations recorded significant financial losses. In some instances, the revenues of news organisations were down by about 75%. This situation makes it difficult for news organisations to pay their journalists and protect them adequately. Owing to the dire financial situation, some news organisations could not supply even a single piece of protective equipment to journalists reporting on the field.

Further, in some countries, the uncertainty created by the global health crisis is being used by malign forces as an opportunity to sabotage, disrupt, and obstruct the free



flow of trusted and reliable information. The pandemic has been weaponized to kill free speech.

The pandemic has therefore provided a convenient excuse to introduce several reporting restrictions such as limiting access to data and punitive legislation. Journalists that defy these limitations face abuse and threats to their lives (Postti et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the physical closure of some newsrooms has presented a series of unexpected difficulties for journalists. Journalists working from the global south especially had a hard time working from home because of poor internet connection and unreliable electricity supply. At the same time, the journalist had to contend with high data costs and unsuitable equipment when working from home or in other locations away from the newsroom (Radcliffe, 2021).

One other challenge with journalism in a COVID-19 era that is least discussed is the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of journalists. COVID-19's influence on incomes, job security, work habits are real. Besides, doubts about the effectiveness of public health advice and policies, alongside the spread of fake news, and concerns about an unclear future, impact everyone (Radcliffe, 2021). However, whilst many people could stop and reflectors could decide to avoid talking about the pandemic for a while, a journalist could not. This situation is exacerbated by the ineffective mental health support systems in developing countries like Ghana (Radcliffe, 2021).

## **2.9 Humanitarian Radio**

The role of radio during the pandemic bears stress because radio is the most widely consumed medium in Ghana and at the global level. The UN Regional Information

Centre (UNRIC) observed that radio remains a vital medium to keep society informed and connected even though there have been changes in media use patterns during the pandemic. Radio stations all over the world have had to adapt to their programming to the exigencies of global health crises (UNRIC, 2020).

Historically, radio has always proven to be the mass medium that adapts easily to crises. Whenever there is a major natural disaster or public health emergency, radio has played a leading role. The use of radio for such humanitarian purposes is usually described as disaster radio or emergency radio or simply humanitarian radio. Humanitarian radio is the use of radio for humanitarian interventions (Tomiak et al., 2019). Radio can be used for humanitarian purposes before a disaster, during a disaster or after the disaster. In the case of COVID-19, radio is being used mainly during the disaster because of the sudden and speedy spread of the virus.

Hugelius et al., (2019) opine further that, humanitarian radio could be used to provide health-related information, advice and psychosocial support to promote the physical and psychosocial wellbeing of communities. Ahsan and Khatun (2020) also confirm that radio can be used to develop community resilience and-efficacy during disasters. This was proven through an investigation of the role of radio during natural disasters such as cyclones in Bangladesh.

Radio provided essential updates on the pandemic especially personal health protection measures and provided solace to scores of people cut off from their loved ones. From Brazil, India to Nigeria radio continues to serve as a window through which the citizens follow the evolution of the pandemic, day by day (Ephraim, 2020; Tomiak, 2021). Whether state-owned, community-owned or privately owned, radio

stations provide key information on COVID-19 cases, and the schedule of the vaccine role out among others.

Besides informing and connecting the public, radio has the potential to fight the spread of COVID-19 related misinformation. This can be achieved when local radio stations collaborate with the state government's COVID-19 task force, or with credible civil society organisations to obtain verified information on the state of the pandemic. Broadcasting statistical updates and verified information at the community level is another useful tactic (Ephraim, 2020).

Like Ephraim et al., (2021) also found that radio stations in India adapted their programming to the exigencies of the pandemic by creating content that helps community members to fight misinformation. Laskar and Bhattacharyya (2021) revealed that radio stations in India (Nuh District of the state of Haryana) broadcasted more dedicated programming services concerning COVID-19 mental health and fake news using two-way communication on community radio stations. Through these broadcasts, the radio stations disseminated fact-checked information to their audiences.

## **2.10 Theoretical Framework**

Two media theories were used for this work: Agenda Setting theory and Framing theory.

### ***2.10.1 Agenda Setting theory***

Agenda setting theory describes the ability of the news media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda, McCombs & Shaw (1972). That is, if a news item is covered frequently, the audience will regard the issue as more important. In reality, mass media only shows the audience what it comprehends as an important issue.

The theory was formally developed by Dr. Max McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw in a study on the 1968 presidential election. In the 1968 “Chapel Hill study”, McCombs and Shaw(1968) demonstrated a strong correlation between what one hundred residents of Chapel Hill, thought was the local and national news media report was the most important issue (Cohen, 1963). By comparing the salience of the issues in news content with the public’s perceptions of the most important election issue, McCombs and Shaw(1968) determined the degree to which the media sways public opinion. Thus, the agenda setting theory was built on the notion that the mass media sets the agenda for what people should care about.

The influence of media affect the presentation of the report and issues made in the news that in turn affect the public mind (Littlejon and Foss, 2009). The news report makes it in a way that when a particular news report is given importance and attention than other news stories, the audience will automatically perceive it as the most important news and prominence is given to them. The priorities of which news comes

first and then the next are set by the media according to how people think and how much influence it will have among the audience.

The agenda setting occurs through a cognitive process known as “accessibility”. Media provides information which is the most relevant food for thought, portrays the major issues of the society and reflects people minds (Matsaganis & Payne, 2005)

The agenda setting theory rests on two basic assumptions: the first is that the media filters and shapes what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience. An example of this is seeing a sensational or a scandalous story at the top of broadcast as opposed to a story that happened more recently or one that affects more people, such as an approaching storm or a legislative tax reform

The second assumption is that, the more attention the media give to an issue, the more likely the public will consider that issues to be important. Another way to look at it; mass media organizations are not telling us what to think or how we should think or feel about a story or an issue, but are giving us certain stories or issues that people should think more about. There is psychological and scientific merit to the agenda setting theory. The more a story is publicized on radio, the more it becomes prominently stored in individual’s memories when they are asked to recall it, even if it doesn’t specifically affect them (McCombs and Shaw, 1993)

There are three types of agenda setting. Public Agenda Setting: when the public determines the agenda for which stories are considered important. Media Agenda Setting: when the media determines the agenda for which stories are considered important. Policy Agenda Setting: when both the public and media agendas influence the decision of public policy makers (McCombs and Shaw, 1993)

The first level of Agenda Setting is usually used by the researcher to study media uses and its objectives or the influences that media create on the people and most proximal though that people will have on the exposure to the information given by the media house.

At the second level, the media focuses on how people should think about the nature of the issue. Thus, sensationalization of news report may happen to bring in the interest of the audience. In fact, media wants to grab attention and implant thoughts in people minds about some serious issues. That is why media turns certain issue viral, like the issue of this global pandemic.

### ***2.10.2 Framing theory***

Frames are interpretive devices that all people use when making sense of the world around them. They aid us in undertaking the difficult task of processing complex and often cumbersome information about our social world by focusing attention only on certain features that may be more important (David & Baden, 2017). Frames provide a simplified code for the understanding of a situation, by focusing only on those features deemed important by the individual involved (sender of the message). This is a very relevant quality of communication because issues are often complicated and require the processing of a great deal of information from a variety of perspectives (Dekavalla, 2018).

In communication and media studies, framing refers to the meaning and representation given to an issue in the media. It may also be understood as a way of communicating text or message which is purposed to promote certain facets of a “perceived reality and make them more salient in such a way that endorses a specific

problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a treatment recommendation” (Entman, 2007). It is an influential way of forming and shaping public opinion.

Framing theory is a media effects theory that is often used to examine the relationship between media coverage and public opinion (Vreese, 2005). Framing theory argues that persons who work in the media such as journalists can communicate with emphasis on certain parts of an issue and can intentionally downplay others. Thus, journalists frame the issues, and they invite media audiences to interpret the issues from that limited field of meaning. Framing theory again assumes that frame building is a systematic process that occurs over time, but frames are reinforced every time they are evoked, whether positively or negatively. It suffices that framing is the outcome of a pattern of news coverage.

News framing refers to the ways or patterns in which the news media report issues and events. It involves selection, exclusion, and cautious contextualization of issues with the intent to facilitate interpretation. As a result, the news media influence and shape public opinion through framing (De Vreese, 2005). News framing and its consequential influence on public opinion have received considerable research attention. Earlier studies (David & Baden, 2017; Dekavalla, 2018; Syeda, 2020) assert that journalists routinely use frames that suggest how everyday happenings should be thought about; they encourage citizens to interpret events and issues in certain ways.

(Syeda, 2020) argues that news framing is inevitable because the media dynamics of the media environment makes journalists and other media workers get constantly constrained of time and other resources. These constraints compel journalists to choose which events to cover and which to ignore. They must also decide which facts,

values and perspectives will be mentioned or given prominence. Consequent to journalist decisions, some definitions, evaluations and recommendations contained within news reports are promoted over others. This affects news audiences by limiting how they perceive and interpret events.

### ***2.10.2.1 Types of Framing***

There are different types of frames, these include journalist frames, issue frames, audience frames and news frames (Erving Goffman, 1974). Journalist frames are frames located within journalists' thoughts about an issue, person, or event. Bruggemann (2014), defines journalist frames as "cognitive patterns of individual journalists". Journalist frames form a context for understanding, interpreting, and ultimately, expressing the facts of an issue making it similar to the issues frames of sources that associate with journalists. Audience frames are located within news audiences. Audience frames are emerging through individual's selectivity of news and interpretation of frames in the news they select (D'Angelo & Shaw, 2018)

Issue frames are held and expressed by individuals who construct an argument from considerations, which are reasons for favoring one side of an issue over another (D'Angelo & Shaw, 2018). Issue frames are more common in political communication, especially political campaign coverage. D'Angelo et al., (2005) describes issue frame as a window on electoral politics through which readers and viewers see candidates as engaging in constructive dialogue about policy issues, as explaining why certain policy-related problems exist, as proposing solutions. News frame is the verbal and visual information in an article that directly or implicitly suggests what the problem is about, how it can be addressed, and who is responsible for creating and solving it (Tewksbury, 2015). The construction of frames for issues



in the news affects news audiences. It suffices that there is interaction between the various types of frames.

The influences of framing on audiences are called framing effects. The power of framing to affect audiences' interpretation comes from its function to heighten the saliency of some aspects of reality over others (Potter, 2019). By framing political, entertainment or pandemic related news stories, facts take on meaning through a frame that organizes them and gives them coherence, making some facts more noticeable than others. Framing theory is therefore suitable for this study because it helps to explain the implications of journalistic practices during the pandemic.

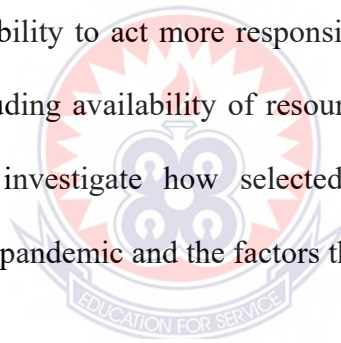
### **2.11 Relevance of the Theories to the Study**

Both the framing theory and the agenda setting theory are relevant to this study because they can help to explain how journalists frame or present issues in the news and how these affect people's understanding of the news and the actions they take. Meanwhile, through agenda setting the media is also able to transfer its determination salient issues on to news audiences. Therefore, both theories are media effect theories, and are connected. Together, the agenda setting theory and the framing theory are valuable for explaining how journalists covered the COVID-19 pandemic. They also offer insights into the effects of the coverage. Both the framing theory and the agenda setting theory can also explain the decisions behind the actions of journalists such as highlighting particular aspects and eliminating the others during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2.12 Chapter Summary

The literature review has shown that COVID-19 has spread to almost all countries and territories of the world, but nations have reacted differently in their response to the pandemic. In Ghana, the media is working closely with the government, academia, and civil society in their response to COVID-19. The work of the media is quite critical in crises and emergencies because they serve as platforms for stakeholder engagement and public education. Radio and television stations that broadcast in local Ghanaian languages such as Ewe, Twi and Ga have been especially helpful in this direction. Unfortunately, not all media messages on the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana are reliable, especially on social media.

In addition, journalist's ability to act more responsibly during crises is affected by a multitude of factors including availability of resources and expert sources. There is, therefore, the need to investigate how selected radio stations in Cape Coast Municipality covered the pandemic and the factors that influenced their coverage



## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological procedure that was employed to conduct the research. This includes the research approach, data collection methods, research design, sampling techniques, data analysis procedure and ethical considerations.

#### 3.2 Research Approach

Scientific enquiry is bounded by different, even competing claims and approaches which are also referred to as research paradigms. The three main research approaches are the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Creswell, 2014; Lewin & Glenton, 2018). In the current study, the researcher adopted the qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach was used because it allows researchers to apply what Mertens (2012) describes as dialectical pluralism and constructivism. In other words, this approach allows for the use of multiple interpretations from the perspectives of research participants. This unique feature of qualitative research enabled the researcher to capture, analyze and preserve the views of journalists and editors about the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Cape Coast Municipality.

In addition, the qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because the relevance of qualitative research continues to grow in the 21st Century. It has become widely accepted as a methodology suitable for uncovering the meanings people place on life experiences and phenomena. Besides, previous studies on media coverage of COVID-19 such as Lupton and Lewis (2021) employed the qualitative approach and reported that it was suitable for exploring the phenomena in-depth.

### **3.3 Research Design**

Research design describes the procedure employed for scientific enquiry. The research design sheds more light on the way a research problem was logically investigated (Creswell, 2014) by presenting a plan or blue print which specifies how data relating to a given problem was collected and analysed. A comparative case study design was adopted for this study. Case studies belong to the family of qualitative research approach. Case studies involve in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under investigation in the natural environment of respondents. A comparative case study implies that the case study contains more than one sub-unit (Bass et al., 2018). In the current study two sub-units (Kingdom FM and Radio Central) were embedded. This gave the researcher the opportunity to investigate media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemics from the perspective of two different media outlets: one private and one public.

The case study design is beneficial for investigating phenomena in their natural context especially when the researcher has no control over the phenomena or events being investigated (Yin, 2014). In a similar vein, the current study investigated the phenomenon of COVID-19 coverage by selected media houses within their natural setting. This is without any influence from the researcher. This design was suitable because it allowed the researcher to adequately explore media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in detail. The design was also helpful in ensuring that adequate and relevant data was gathered for the study as stated by Creswell (2014).

### **3.4 Study Area**

The Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly (CCMA) is one of the twenty (20) political and administrative Districts in the Central Region of Ghana. The Metropolitan area is

bounded to the South by the Gulf of Guinea, West by the Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem Municipal District (at Iture Bridge), East by the Abura-Asebu-Kwamankese District and to the North by the Heman-Lower Denkyira District (Cape Coast Municipal Assembly, 2014). The Metropolis is principally urban. There is, however, a large rural population. This rural minority is often lost sight of by donors (Cape Coast Municipal Assembly, 2014). Like most parts of Ghana, the media landscape in Cape Coast is competitive, and radio remains an essential source of public opinion.

### **3.5 Sampling Strategy**

Sampling refers to the selection of a section of the study population for detailed investigation (Hall & Roussel 2010). Sampling is very important for a research project because it is sometimes impracticable for an entire population of a study to be considered. The researcher employed the purposive sampling technique in this study

#### **3.5.1 Purposive Sampling**

The purposive sampling technique is also known as judgment sampling. This involves making a deliberate choice of research participants based on pre-identified criteria or qualities that participants may possess (Etikan et al., 2016). This kind of sampling does not rely on any underlying theories or fixed number of participants. Basically, the researcher decides what kinds of information is needed and in what quantity and then sets out to find people who can and are willing and able to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experiences.

Purposive sampling was used to select journalists and managements of Kingdom FM and Radio Central to participate in the study. The two radio stations were selected because they represented public (Radio Central) and private (Kingdom Radio)

broadcasting stations in Cape Coast. Besides, both stations are also among the most listened to radio stations in the Cape Coast Municipality (Central Media Awards, 2020). Another reason for choosing the respondent was because they were willing to participate in the study. The purposive sampling technique is suitable for the study as it was useful for selecting respondents based on predetermined criteria such as respondents who by virtue of their position and tenure have more information about the positioning strategies and challenges of the organisation. The rationale for choosing purposive sampling for this study is that it is beneficial for identifying and selecting participants who are most knowledgeable and possess the needed information, this saves time and ensures the most proper utilization of available resources. To be specific, the selected participants were suitable because they produced and presented news at the selected radio stations.

### **3.5.2 Sample Size**

In all 6 people, which comprises of two news editors and four journalists (three from each Radio station) were sampled using purposive sampling strategy. The sample size was sufficient because qualitative studies are generally inductive and do not seek to gather data from large samples for the purpose of generalization (Cresswell, 2014). Qualitative studies instead focus on just a few respondents for the purpose of gathering detailed data. The sample size is again adequate because according to Omona (2013), although there is no numerical sample expectations in qualitative studies, an average of five (5) respondents is sufficient to achieve data saturation.

### **3.6 Data collection method**

#### **I. interviews**

Primary data for this study was obtained from staff and management of Radio Central and Kingdom Fm through in-depth interviews. Interviews are the commonest format of data collection in qualitative research. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) indicate that qualitative interview is an attempt to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences by exploring issues from their perspective. Interviews vary in nature based on their style of questioning, length, and whether they are carried out in person or over the telephone (King, 2001).

This study made use of an interview guide which according to Jamshed (2014) helps to explore participants' views about issues both comprehensively and systematically whilst keeping the interview focused on the desired issues or phenomena. The interview guide comprised of several questions relating to the objectives of the study. The interview guide for this study was developed by the researcher based on the objectives and scope of the study. This instrument was useful for coordinating the interviews and for making sure that enough information is gathered on all the research objectives for analysis.

There are different types of interviews, in this study however, the researcher used a semi structured interview. Structured interviews involve standardized questions which enable the interviewer to ask each respondent about the same issues in the same way (Lewin & Glenton, 2018). The researcher opted for structured interviews because it presents an opportunity to ask the same questions of all respondents to obtain comparable responses. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and they were asked to select a date a time that they would be

available for the interviews. All interviews were conducted at the work premises of the respondents. The interviews were also audio recorded with the permission of the respondents.

The use of interviews afforded the researcher greater flexibility in data collection and allowed the researcher the opportunity to explore media coverage of COVID-19 in-depth from the perspective of journalists and other media workers. This technique was particularly useful because the journalists interviewed were information-rich and the interviews allowed them to flow whilst occasionally pinning them to specific issues. The main challenge with this data collection technique is that interviews produce large unstructured data when transcribed and this can lead data to overload and leave the researcher overwhelmed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

### **3.7 Data Collection Procedure**

Data was collected using the traditional face-to-face in-depth interviews from July, 2021 to October, 2021. The interviewees were first contacted via telephone. I got the numbers of the interviewees from a friend who works in one of the media organizations in Cape Coast. I called them and scheduled an appointment with each of them a time and places of their convenience. All of which most of them agreed to be interviewed at their various workplaces. Once the interviewees accepted to be interviewed, I sent them the interview guide via email and then arranged to meet them for the interviews. Each interview with a participant lasted for about fifteen to thirty minutes.

On the day of each interview, I went with my smartphone (iPhone 7plus) to audio record the interviews. The researcher (myself) began each interview by explaining the purpose of the study to respondent to obtain their explicit informed consent as is demanded by ethical research (Creswell, 2014). All but respondent did not agree to be audio recorded. Field notes



were also taken at a point where an interviewee did not agree to be recorded because I did not have an introductory letter from the school and department I am studying. The semi-structured interview guides (attached as appendix) were used to direct the nature of the interview with interviewee. This notwithstanding, the researcher (myself) allowed for respondent to occasionally mention or talk about issues that were not on the interview guides.

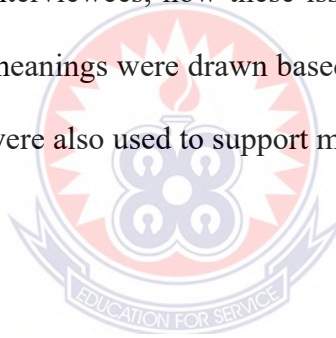
This process was repeated for all the respondents to obtain more information, a simple and clear language devoid of ambiguity as suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2003). Also, in line with Lindlof and Taylor's (2012) assertion of what characterizes a good qualitative investigation, the interview questions posed to the respondent were straight to the point questions and brief. The interactions during the interview encounters and focused on both the organizational and individual perspective on the phenomenon under study.

### **3.8 Method Data analysis**

Data analysis is crucial for credible qualitative research. This study applied the thematic data analysis technique for analysing the interview responses. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) define thematic analysis as a process of identifying themes or patterns within textual data. Thematic analysis is useful because it is not tied to any theoretical perspective or epistemology which makes it generally suitable for analysing different kinds of interview data.

While there are different ways of approaching thematic analysis, this study adopted Braun and Clark's (2006) six steps in conducting thematic analysis. These are, transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finalizing the analysis.

First, the researcher transcribed verbatim the interview data that was collected. This was done playing the recorded audio continuously to ensure that no single detail is missed. After the vivid transcription, the researcher familiarized herself with the transcribed data by reading it continuously to identify certain recurring ideas and patterns. Codes were initially derived from the familiarization done. The codes were further submerged into themes. Further readings were done to clearly identify the themes and situate them within the context the research questions guiding the research work. The final step was the analysis level where the generated themes were presented. In presenting analysis of the data, the researcher had to interpret and comment on the assembled data as directed by Genzük (2003), I looked out for issues that were raised by the interviewees, how these issues related to one another and to other literature and then meanings were drawn based on the theories underpinning the study. Direct quotations were also used to support my analysis and discussions.



### **3.9 Research Ethics**

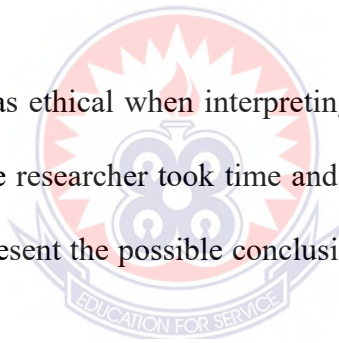
Research ethics provides guidelines for the responsible conduct of scientific investigation. In addition, research ethics is what guides scientists to ensure that scientific investigations are conducted responsibly and according to high ethical standards (Dooly et al., 2017). The first ethical principle observed during the conduct of this study was beneficence. The beneficence principle implores researchers to prioritize the welfare of participants and not harm them. No aspect of this study posed harm or put participants in danger (Dooly et al., 2017).

In addition, consistent with Xu et al., (2020), the researcher took steps to protect the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of the information they volunteered. In

line with this, neither the questionnaire nor the interview obtained traceable personal information such as house address, besides, data obtained from respondents are not shared with any third party. Again, to protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms were also used in place of the actual names of participants. The researcher also did not use the data for any other purpose besides this study.

Again, the informed consent of respondents was sought before data collection. Xu et al., (2020) notes that research participants have the right to partake or withdraw from a research process at any point in time. As a result of this, the purpose of the current research was explained to each participant and their implied consent was sought before they participated in the study.

Finally, the researcher was ethical when interpreting and analyzing the results of the findings of the study. The researcher took time and exercised caution to interpret the data accurately, and to present the possible conclusions as closely as possible without bias.



### **3.10 Credibility/Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research methods have traditionally been criticized for lacking rigor and credibility. However, as qualitative methods have been increasingly used in scientific inquiries, efforts to address these criticisms have also increased. The use of thematic data analysis for example provides structure and integrates reflexivity in qualitative research therefore making it more rigorous and credible (Mackieson et al., 2019).

### **3.11 Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the methodology adopted for the study. The researcher employed an embedded case study design which is under the qualitative research approach. Primary data was obtained through structured interviews with journalists and editors purposively selected from two radio stations in the Cape Coast Municipality. Data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis and steps were taken to ensure that the outcomes of the study are credible and reliable.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the data collected. The analysis is presented in a manner that directly addresses the three research questions that undergird the study. The research questions are restated here for emphasis.

- i. What are the sources of information on COVID-19 shared by the selected radio stations in the Cape Coast Municipality?
- ii. What frames are used by the selected radio stations in the coverage of COVID-19 stories in the Cape Coast Municipality?
- iii. What are the challenges encountered by journalists of the selected Radio stations during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The researcher assigned codes to the interviewees to ensure their anonymity in line with Creswell's (2014) argument that researchers must make efforts at respecting the privacy of the participants. The identity of the first respondent was replaced with R-1, that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> respondent was R-2 and so on.

#### **4.2 RQ1: What are the sources of information on COVID-19 shared by the selected radio stations in the Cape Coast Municipality?**

The first research question sought to ascertain the sources of information that reporters and editors at Central Radio and Kingdom FM relied on during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Cape Coast Municipality. This research question was addressed through interviews with selected journalists and editors at both radio stations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists were confronted with the task of gathering and distributing information accurately and safely. Though Shoemaker & Reese (1991) categorized news source into direct and indirect, my findings revealed that, journalists at radio Central and Kingdom FM made predominant use of indirect source. The main sources of information on COVID-19 were *medical experts, government officials, social media, and external news organisations* (outside the central region). The nature of journalists' reliance on the various sources of information is explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

#### **4.2.1 Medical Experts**

The interviews revealed that journalists relied heavily on scientists and public health authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic for news. New reporters and editors depended on these group for news because they considered them more knowledgeable and credible when it comes to COVID-19. This falls in line with what Ross (2014) stated that;

One reporter stated that:

*Due to the fluid and unprecedented nature of the situation, we are only allowed to report official statistics. At the onset, we were only allowed to listen to medical experts like doctors and other professionals who work with the central region health directorate (R-2).*

Another respondent stated,

*I will say the pandemic is the one issue where everyone wanted to listen to expert advice. As a media house, we realized this early, so we started giving experts a prominent role in our coverage. We empaneled experts during our shows, we interviewed them as part of*

*prime-time news and whenever we can, we crosscheck our facts with the experts before coming on air (R-5).*

It was further realized that even before the pandemic, some journalists had already established acquaintances with medical experts in their line of duty, their dependence on these pre-existing contacts however intensified during the pandemic. One of such journalists quipped:

*Even before the pandemic, I had some friends who were doctors because I produce and host a health program. During the pandemic, I found myself relying more on the doctors as I aimed at informing the public about the causes of the pandemic and the possible preventative measures to be taken to slow down the spread (R-1).*

The responses show that journalists mainly relied on medical doctors and other health experts as news sources during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reliance on experts is in tandem with Ross's (2004) assertion that medical experts increasingly attract a central role in counteracting the spread of the pandemic. Journalists are often unable to explain issues in detail because not many journalists specialize in the coverage of the humanitarian crisis and relief stories.

#### **4.2.2 Government sources and Elected officials**

This findings<sup>7</sup> further revealed that journalists turned to politicians and government officials for information on the COVID-19 pandemic.

One editor remarked:

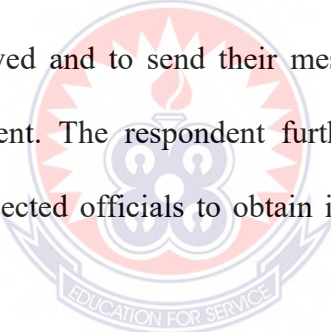
*Working in a local radio station presents a double burden. One must monitor the national situation and local one and explain both in the local language to our listeners. As an editor, I followed every press conference organized at the Ministry of Information in Accra and the*

*regular addresses of the president. Later, there were regular press conferences at the Central Region too and I made sure my news team followed that also closely (R-6).*

Another respondent stated:

*I followed MCE and regional Minister for updates because political leadership at the center is essential to sustain the complex political, social and economic balance of adopting containment measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic while ensuring the provision of essential services (R-3).*

Lidskog et al., (2020) note that the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for decisive leadership given the far-reaching consequences of the pandemic. As a result, political leadership at both the local and national level readily availed themselves to the media to be interviewed and to send their messages to citizens strategically to deepen trust in government. The respondent further revealed that they turned to government source and elected officials to obtain insights on what is being done to contain the pandemic.



#### **4.2.3 External news sources and social media**

It was also realized that social media, especially Facebook became a source of information on COVID-19 for some journalists.

An editor remarked:

*As a journalist, I have the responsibility to be upfront about the facts and be on top of the situation, break down the new concepts and clearly explain them to the people of Cape Coast but sometimes there are delays in information flow from the official sources, so I resort to other sources like Facebook for leads (R-6).*



Similar to the views above, another reporter stated:

*I received a lot of personal messages on social media about COVID-19 but sadly many of such information turned out to be false. I will not say I depended on social media for my news, but I cannot deny that I received some information through social media (R-3).*

Journalists' reliance on social media comes at a risk because of the easy spread of fake news on social media. However, journalists cannot entirely ignore social media in the search for news because as Perreault and Perreault (2021) revealed, social media has become a part of the news ecology. Perreault and Perreault (2021) argue that journalists exist as a part of an ecology in which journalism influences and is influenced by the environment. As a result, journalists were working in a context where there is abundant or superfluous information on social media, they however had to verify social media claims before sharing them with news audiences.

Besides social media, the journalists also depended on information from their professional contacts and social networks. Such personal contacts were often people outside of the Central Region that the journalists considered as authoritative.

*You know we are affiliated to Kingdom in Accra so some of their journalists also give us information and we also give them regional updates. I am a registered member of GJA so I have journalist contacts in Accra and other parts of the country that I call for information or clarification (R-4).*

*I will say just as we pick news feed from Radio Ghana we also depend on them for some updates. We rely on Ghana News Agency because they have access to highly placed national sources. So that is it we rely on sources also outside the region (R-3).*

It is important to note that both Kingdom FM and Radio Central have affiliate stations in Accra, the national capital. Therefore, both stations as a matter of convenience share information with their affiliates and they also rely on the affiliate's stations in Accra for pertinent information.

#### **4.2.4 Listeners and community members**

Journalists at Kingdom FM and Radio Central also turned to their listeners and community members for news, but to a lesser extent. The respondents explained that they received tip offs, leads and unsolicited information about the COVID-19 pandemic from community members.

*We received a lot of calls and personal messages too. We ignored many of them because we could not independently ascertain their facticity, but we followed up on a few. Some turned out to be true, but many were misrepresentations of the facts or outright fake news (R-4).*

Another respondent stated that,

*I remember very well people called into one of our shows expressing their displeasure at the selection of public school as a COVID-19 treatment centre. Later when we followed up on the story the authorities were only contemplating the action and had not done any such thing, so we used our airwaves to inform the good people of the Central Region that this and that is the truth (R-2).*

It is quite significant that community members decide to volunteer information on COVID-19 to journalists. This demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between the media and society suggested by Possetti et al., (2020), that in crises, journalists serve as a conduit for communications, or they play a facilitative role by carrying messages from the people to experts and from experts to the wider or public. It also shows that listeners or community members trust the media enough to share pieces of information with them. The media organisations do not however just share such information but go through the rigor of fact – checking them before disseminating news in relation to such public sources.

Taken together, it is evident from the findings that journalists relied on multiple sources of information during the coverage of the pandemic. The main sources of information on COVID-19 were medical experts, government officials, social media, and external news organisations (outside the central region) and community members. Journalists' reliance on multiple sources is commendable because, during disease outbreaks, the media is relied on to inform the public but also to shape their perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours (Khoo (2020)). Reliance on multiple sources implies that there is diversity in media coverage of the pandemic.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a parallel pandemic of disinformation as there was superfluous information from multiple sources. Suffice to say the abundance of information gives room for falsehoods and misinformation fester when there is too much information making it difficult to control information flow. Misinformation is deadly as it can confused people about life-saving personal and policy choices. Although misinformation may happen in different news environments, it is particularly rife in digital media environments (Tarakini et al., 2021).

The identification of social media as one of the sources of information confirms the assertion of Tarakini et al., (2021) and Pieri, (2019) that social media has come of age, and has become the medium through which many people receive news and pertinent information. Social media served as a mechanism through which the international team of WHO received critical alerts alongside communication issued from official channels (Pieri, 2019). However, the fluid and boundless nature of digital media makes them difficult to control or regulate. This attribute is significant because some governments seek to stringently control the flow of information during health crises.

Further, the reliance on community sources shows that journalists were dependent on informal sources which also suggests that they allowed for dialogic or truly participatory discourse during the coverage of the pandemic. This finding is consistent with Segtub and Tabong (2021) and (Nkansah, 2020) who opined that the broadcast media especially radio stations in Ghana allow their platforms to be used to hold public discussions about the spread of COVID-19 and the safety protocols that can stem the spread. Nkansah, (2020) notes that radio broadcasts in local Ghanaian Language have been especially helpful in this direction.

#### **4.3 RQ2: What frames were used by the selected radio stations in the coverage of COVID-19 stories in the Cape Coast Municipality?**

The second research question sought to investigate the frames used by journalists to report the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists engage in framing whenever they select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to influence audiences understanding of issues. Three

mainframes were identified from the journalists' coverage of the pandemic. The frames were, a refutation of misconception, global pandemic, and war frame.

#### **4.3.1 Refutation of Misconception**

Compounding the public health challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic is the spread of misinformation regarding the risks, prevention, and treatments of the disease. The situation led to the framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that seeks to address the misconceptions associated with the disease.

During the interviews, journalist stated:

*We knew some of the misconceptions surrounding the pandemic, so we sought to address the misconceptions through our coverage. Right here behind this building, there is a bar across the street and some people I interviewed there for a story believed that they could prevent COVID through the intake of alcohol. In such instances, we raise those misconceptions and address them with the fact when we go back to the studio (R-2).*

Another respondent averred that

*In the course of distributing PPEs and sanitizers to some communities, we realized that some people believed chewing ginger and lemon and other things prevent COVID, so they did not see the need for PPEs. When this happened, we found a nice way of making a news story that emphasized the importance of PPEs (R-5).*

The refutation of the misconception frame was also used to rebut vaccine misinformation as noted by R - 4.

*Initially, people wanted to reject the vaccine for all sorts of funny reasons, so we had to confront and address those false claims through our programs. It was a kind of fact-checking or a reality check, but it was productive because there was no significant resistance in the Central Region when the vaccines were eventually rolled in (R-4).*

During the interviews with the journalists, it became clear that the refutation of the misconception frame emerged out of necessity. Journalists framed the pandemic the way they did to combat the excessive misinformation surrounding it. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic presented an opportunity for unscrupulous persons to create and share false information to mislead unsuspecting news audiences. Unfortunately, misinformation has become a part of the modern news ecology (Perreault and Perreault, 2021) therefore journalists had to dispel the misconceptions to make the facts stand out. Perreault and Perreault (2021) note that the news environment has changed, and journalists must adapt to these changes. The use of misconception refutation frame can therefore be described as one of the ways through which journalists are adapting to the changing news ecology.

#### ***4.3.2 Global pandemic***

COVID-19 was also framed as a global epidemic. Journalists thus covered COVID-19 through the lens of globalization. Although the coverage of the selected radio stations is limited to parts of the Central Region, the journalists said they felt it was necessary to mention the global COVID-19 infection rates to put things into perspective and

project its severity. By raising the narrative beyond Ghana and Africa, the journalists framed COVID-19 as a global issue.

When asked whether his station did anything special during the coverage of the pandemic.

R-1 stated

*We did programs that gave people updates about the global COVID-19 situation. Sometimes we even compared the situation in Ghana to other countries so that people will understand that the problem is big and serious.*

Another respondent also made a similar claim in a separate interview.

*When people began to complain that the measures in Ghana were harsh, I tell them about what is happening in Italy and then ask them to decide whether they want Ghanaians to suffer like Italians because of COVID. Besides, COVID is not a Ghana problem or Africa problem, it's a global problem so we always reiterate that because it helps people to see the bigger picture then they can advise themselves accordingly.*

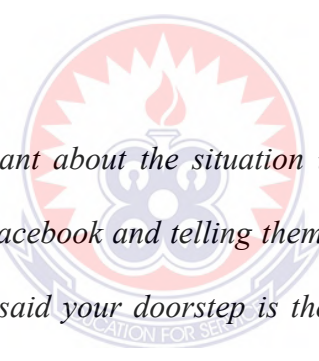
The use of the global pandemic frame is in line with what Hackworth (2021) describes as the normative role of journalists. Hackworth (2021) and Perreault and Perreault (2021) consider the main role of a journalist to be the sharing of relevant information with the public. As a result, informing audiences about the extensive nature of the pandemic and its worldwide spread is an important piece of information that helps to put the issue into a larger context. Historically, journalists have followed a set of roles and responsibilities to ensure that they serve the public well. This role of

the journalist is particularly important during a global health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **4.3.3 The War Frame**

The journalistic discourse around the COVID-19 epidemic made use of war-related metaphors. It was realized that journalists used words, language, and frames that suggested that COVID-19 is an enemy out to attack humanity. Through the frame of war, journalists enlisted support for COVID-19 prevention protocols by calling on their audience to stand on the side of humanity and protect each other by 'fighting' the virus.

R-2 stated:



*People were adamant about the situation until we started showing them pictures on Facebook and telling them about the numbers. Like Nana Akufo Addo said your doorstep is the front line or the actual battleground. So we just told people that to win the fight we as Ghanaian must ensure a complete change in our everyday behavior.*

Another respondent stated:

*I don't think we went for a meeting to decide what to tell the people of Cape Coast and how to tell them. The thing is that COVID-19 was killing people every day, so it was like war, there are casualties and we told people what they needed to know to avoid becoming casualties. So constantly, we remind the people of Cape Coast that the battle is not over so that they will be more careful (R-6).*



As evidenced above, COVID-19 was framed in many respects as war that humanity must win. This frame was clear because COVID-19 is recognized as the worst infectious disease the world has experienced since the Spanish Flu of 1918 (Castiglioni & Gaj, 2020). This gave journalists the impetus to draw attention to the severity of the situation by likening it to war as it threatened human survival. Journalists relied on the war frame to launch a call to action which was necessary to get more people involved in working to reduce the spread of the pandemic. Under the framing theory (De Vreese, 2005; David & Baden, 2017), the war frame used by a journalist would invariably influence audiences understanding of the issues because through framing, journalists invite media audiences to interpret the issues from that limited field of meaning. Framing theory again assumes that frame building is a systematic process that occurs over time, suffice to say the development of the war frame was not immediate but happened over time.

Summarily, the frame of misconception refutation, global pandemic and the frame of war were the main pillars that shaped people's understanding of the pandemic in Cape Coast. Of the three frames identified, the war frame is the most typical news frame. This is because war is a form of conflict and conflict is a news value and several news stories are framed as conflicts or carry elements of conflict (Bartholomé et al., 2018). The frame of misconception refutation and frame of global pandemic on the other hand are issue-specific frames that are related to the public health crises that COVID-19 has plunged the world into. As D'Angelo (2017) noted, issue frames refer to topic-specific frames based on considerations defined in favour of an issue. Therefore, the frames used by the journalist showed the aspects of the COVID-19 that the journalist would like to portray and subsequently want their audience to think about.

The use of the misconceptions frame, global pandemic frame and the war frames may cause news audiences to perceive the pandemic as a contentious issue that is a problem for the global community and therefore the need to take harsh and drastic measures as happens during wars. From a theoretical standpoint, the frame has consequences and as a result, the frames used affect audiences over time by shaping their meanings, definitions, and interpretations of ongoing events (De Vreese, 2005). The frames also focus people's attention on specific aspects and neglect other options of understanding, thereby shaping the views and perceptions about the pandemic.

The journalists used words and terminologies that they thought resonated with what their audiences would believe and accept. In doing so, they allowed themselves considerably more leverage in what they asked of the public, such as a complete change in their everyday behaviour, acceptance of higher casualty numbers, and compliance with harsher measures. The outcomes of this study are consistent with Kotišová (2019) and Hackworth, (2021) who opined that during crises, journalists may influence the narrative significantly through their choice of words and frames. For Kotišová (2019), media practices and the actions of journalists during crises must be understood as a complex whole because the actions and inactions of journalists have implications. Kotišová (2019) explained that journalists' thoughts and strategic actions have unintended consequences. Their choice of words and use of practical devices may lead to the construction of frames and other (desired and undesired) effects.

#### **4.4 RQ3: What challenges were encountered by journalists of Central Radio and Kingdom FM during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Journalists face some unique challenges when they try to report accurately on a major infectious disease outbreak like COVID-19. The third and final objective of the study sought to investigate the challenges faced by journalists during their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Central Region of Ghana. The interviews revealed that journalists experienced some challenges, namely, *the uncertainty and complexity of the pandemic, difficulty in getting access to expert sources as well as public misperceptions and misinformation*. Journalists also had difficulties conveying the seriousness of the situation without causing panic and they did not have training and resources for effective reportage, especially during the first wave of the pandemic.

##### **4.4.1 *Uncertainty and complexity of the pandemic***

The interviews revealed that although journalists sought to share only truthful information with the public, it was difficult for them to characterize the health threat, who is affected, and how things will unfold in the days and weeks ahead. The uncertainties were very high at the onset of the pandemic in 2020.

The responses of two reporters from Radio Central and Kingdom FM respectively:

*I will say initially we had sketchy details about the situation. I knew it was a highly contagious disease but the incubation periods, causes, initial symptoms and how it spreads were not clear. It was a very uncertain situation because some of the information given to us by experts were also conflicting, so it became difficult to tell what is true and what was not (R-2).*

*At the onset, around March 2020 my major headache was what to report. I knew I must report something, but what? I had not experienced the pandemic and I didn't know anyone who had so the information I had was only what was available out there. In addition, at the start, doctors in Cape Coast had not started giving out information about our local situation in Cape Coast (R-3).*

Another respondent added that;

*Unfortunately, there was so much information from almost every source imaginable and this only worsened the situation and made it even more difficult to decide on what to broadcast when (R-4).*

These responses demonstrate a lack of understanding of the pandemic at the onset. This is not a surprising finding because most laypeople, including journalists, have limited knowledge about COVID-19. However, the uncertainty and lack of understanding surrounding the pandemic was a major challenge because earlier studies (Hackworth, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021) reported that Journalists' ability to report the pandemic effectively depended on their perceptions and understanding of the disease. Journalists cannot effectively report on the disease if they don't understand it. As a result of this, journalists have the challenging task of gathering, interpreting, and distributing accurate information during the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty and difficulty in understanding the pandemic are likely to hamper the quality of coverage of the pandemic.

#### ***4.4.2 Difficulty in getting access to expert sources***

Media coverage of past pandemics and disasters has shown that it can be difficult for journalists to get unfettered access to critical news sources such as high-level

government officials and incident managers. The current study also revealed that it was difficult for journalists to get access to the government experts and public health people for interviews at the initial stages of the pandemic.

A respondent said:

*It got to a time, it was very difficult to get through to trusted sources like the central regional health director and other key health experts. They kept saying, they are busy and sometimes the call will even not go through. Personally, I don't blame them because all media houses in the region were competing for their attention (R-2).*

When asked about the challenges she faced in reporting the pandemic, another journalists remarked:

*We had many sources that we could rely on such as the Ministry of Health website, colleague journalists and other people, but we had trouble in reaching critical sources like experts at the University of Cape Coast medical school and the regional health directorate (R-1).*

Pandemic situations and major crises place more demands on the journalist to share relevant and truthful information to help their audiences make sense of what is happening. The responses of journalists however show that they had major difficulties in finding expert news sources. This finding is consistent with Colarossi (2020) who observed that the effective dissemination of information by journalists during public health crises can be significantly affected by the structure and composition of the media environment such as the availability of trusted experts' news sources. Access to trusted news sources is critical because journalists exist as a part of an ecology in which journalism influences and is influenced by the environment. As a result of this, the extent to which journalist discharge their duties is dependent on the sources available to them.

#### **4.4.3 Conveying the seriousness of the situation without causing panic**

Covid-19 pandemic is no doubt a serious issue, but worse than the pandemic is the excessive fear and panic which can immobilize people. Journalists found it challenging to appropriately frame issues surrounding the pandemic in a way that invokes public action without causing fear and panic.

A journalist expressed his concern in the following words;

*I think another challenge that we faced was how to give out the message in a serious way without causing panic. We were all aware of what panic can do in a community with high illiteracy, so we were cautious. However, it was difficult balancing the severity of the situation with the need for people to stay calm. At one point we'll give out the figures and say everybody must be alarmed at another point we'll calm the people down and say once they observe the safety protocols everything will be fine. (R-3)*

In a separate interview, another editor mentioned that he felt compelled to hold back some details during the coverage for fear that it may cause fear and panic.

*I will say it was a difficult and very uncomfortable thing to do. To use me as an example, sometimes I felt the need to put out the actual locations and neighborhoods where COVID-19 cases have been reported, but then people living in such areas may end up being stigmatized. So I normally generalize and say cases have been recorded in Central Region or the Cape Coast Municipality (R-6).*

The personal example above demonstrates the dilemma which journalists faced in balancing the severity of the situation with the need to prevent unnecessary fear and panic. Journalists were faced with the challenge of striking a precarious balance between impressing on citizens the importance of taking precautionary measures, without creating mass panic and paranoia.

#### **4.4.4 Public misperceptions and misinformation**

While COVID-19 posed a public health risk, political responses and public perceptions in Ghana have been divided across ideological lines. While there has been a broad public agreement for some preventative measures, such as restricting international travel to Ghana and the wearing of nose masks, misperceptions about the severity of the situation meant that people resisted messages from the media.

Recounting the challenge of public misperceptions, one journalist lamented:

*People didn't take us seriously because of the initial myths on causes and vulnerability of people to the disease. Even to this day, some people believe that COVID-19 is a problem for white people. It was very difficult countering such obvious misconceptions (R-3)*

*As part of public health messages designed by the FDA [Food and Drugs Authority], we encouraged people to use alcohol-based sanitizers, but some people misconstrued the message. I know many people who were drinking alcohol because they believed that I could prevent COVID-19 (R-3)*

In a separate interview, a news reporter stated that:

*People also said that the hot climate in Africa inhibited viral replication. Some believed that COVID-19 was being used as a biological weapon to target African countries. These misconceptions embolden people to resist the right information that we give as news (R-3).*

It can be deduced from the interviews that the COVID-19 situation gave room for the creation and spread of false information. Misconceptions and myths about the

pandemic are globally acknowledged as a major challenge for journalism because journalists through the media are the brokers of information in society. Like news, misinformation and misconceptions may also find their way into the media. As a result, some scholars including Anwar et al., (2020) argue that the media can be blamed for the spread of misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic.

The challenges associated with misinformation during the pandemic was earlier reported by Casero-Ripollés, (2020). Like Casero-Ripollés (2020) this study also revealed that journalists face the challenge of sifting through COVID-19 myths, false information, and sometimes state propaganda to find the truth. All sources of information have also become potential sources of misinformation. Casero-Ripollés (2020) argues that politicians, government representatives and elected officials are all potential sources of disinformation. To make matters worse, popular social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp have become prolific purveyors of false and misleading information within the media ecosystem. Social media has helped to make disinformation more available and difficult to fight.

#### ***4.4.5 Inadequate resources and preparations***

It was also revealed that, reporters and editors were not adequately prepared to cover the pandemic effectively due to inadequate resources amongst other things. Many journalists agreed that before the pandemic they had not received any prior training on how to report during disasters or public health emergencies.

When asked his station's level of preparedness before the crises, one editor smiled and said;

*We were also caught unaware like the rest of the world. In fact, during the lockdown, it was a challenge to get some of our*



*journalists to work from home or other places without coming to the office to edit sound or check something. As interest in the pandemic grew, some journalists like the host of our morning show and other presenters had to be sent out on assignment although they did not have all the skills and training for such specialized coverage (R-3).*

Commenting on the availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other material resources, R1 stated:

*For me when I cover a story, I use my lorry fare so when I go and they give me something, that is also mine. So, I did not have access to let's say company car or PPE but I was able to provide all that for myself. However, there was always sanitiser and nose masks for us to use when in the office.*

The responses above indicate that journalists faced resource constraints and also lacked the training to cover the pandemic effectively. The journalists however, explained that this did not have any serious adverse impact on the quality of their work because they improvised or found other means to go around the challenges. This finding of the study confirms Khoo (2020) who noted that despite their limitations, journalists play a key role in public health communication which contributed to the reduction in the spread of the COVID-19 in Ghana.

The safety of journalists is another well-documented challenge associated with media coverage of pandemics. The findings of this study, therefore, confirmed the views of previous researchers such as Radcliffe, (2021) and Gabore (2020) that examine issues pertaining to the pandemic that are relevant to the personal safety and welfare of journalists. The instinct of every trained journalist is to go out and get the story whilst it is still breaking, but COVID-19 places important limitations on the extent to which journalists can go. The high transmissibility of the COVID-19 virus implies that

journalists must take precautions every time they go out to report. In some countries, COVID-19 treatment centers are not accessible to journalists unless they obtain explicit authorization. Journalists must also keep a safe distance and observe other protocols whenever they are out there to gather information from their sources (Radcliffe, 2021).

Finally, as Possetti et al., (2020) earlier suggested, media coverage of the pandemic was also influenced by the availability of resources. Although some of the journalists who participated in this study indicated that where their organisations could not provide the funds, they relied on the support of the donations (popular known as ‘soli’) of officials or politicians who invited them to cover the stories, such action must not be encouraged because it compromises the integrity of journalists.

### **Summary**

The study revealed that journalists at both Central Radio and Kingdom FM relied on multiple sources of information during the coverage of the pandemic. The main sources of information on COVID-19 were *medical experts, government officials, social media, external media organisations (outside the central region) and community members*.

It also emerged that journalists used the refutation of *misconception frame, global pandemic frame, and the war frame* in covering the COVID-19 pandemic in the Central Region of Ghana. The use of these frames may cause news audiences to understand the pandemic as a contentious issue that is a problem for the global community and therefore harsh and drastic measures to control and prevent.

Further, this study revealed that journalists found it challenging to appropriately frame issues surrounding the pandemic in a way that invoked public action without causing fear and panic. Journalists also faced other challenges such as the uncertainty and complexity of the pandemic and difficulty in getting access to expert sources. In addition, journalist did not have the training and resources for effective reportage, especially during the first wave of the pandemic. Finally, journalists encountered several public misperceptions and misinformation that hampered their work.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

#### 5.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the study presents a recap of all major findings, conclusions, and recommendations for improving media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 5.2 Summary

This study investigated media coverage of COVID-19 in Ghana by focusing on two selected radio stations (Kingdom FM and Radio Central) in the Cape Coast Municipality. The study identified the sources of information on COVID-19 shared by the selected radio stations in the Municipality. It also examined the frames used by the selected radio stations in the coverage of COVID-19 and finally ascertained the challenges encountered by journalists of Central Radio and Kingdom FM during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. A multiple case study design was used, and data was gathered from purposively selected journalists and editors through structured interviews. Data obtained was subjected to thematic analysis and, it was found out that journalists were confronted with the up-hill task of gathering and distributing information accurately and safely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study revealed that journalists at both Central Radio and Kingdom FM relied on multiple sources of information during the coverage of the pandemic. The main sources of information on COVID-19 were medical experts, government officials, social media, external media organisations (outside the central region) and community members.

It also emerged that journalists used the refutation of *misconception frame*, *global pandemic frame*, and *the war frame* in covering the COVID-19 pandemic in the Central Region of Ghana. The use of these frames may cause news audiences to understand the pandemic as a contentious issue that is a problem for the global community and therefore harsh and drastic measures to control and prevent.

Further, this study revealed that journalists found it challenging to appropriately frame issues surrounding the pandemic in a way that invoked public action without causing fear and panic. Journalists also faced other challenges such as the uncertainty and complexity of the pandemic and difficulty in getting access to expert sources. In addition, journalist did not have the training and resources for effective reportage, especially during the first wave of the pandemic. Finally journalists encountered several public misperceptions and misinformation that hampered their work.

### 5.3 Conclusion

Journalists' reliance on multiple sources is commendable because according to Khoo (2020) the media is the main bridge between various stakeholders during disease outbreaks and crisis. Whilst reliance on multiple formal and informal sources implies that there is diversity in media coverage of the pandemic, journalists' reliance on social media comes at a risk because of the easy spread of fake news on social media (Raza et al., 2021). However, journalists cannot entirely ignore social media in the search for news because as Perreault and Perreault (2021) revealed, social media has become a part of the news ecology. Meanwhile, it is significant that community members decided to volunteer information on COVID-19 to journalists. This demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between the media and society suggested by Possetti et al., (2020).

It can also be concluded that in framing the coverage of COVID-19, the journalists used words and terminologies that resonated with their audiences. In doing so, they allowed themselves considerably more leverage in what they asked of the public, such as a complete change in their everyday behaviour, acceptance of higher casualty numbers, and compliance with harsher measures. The outcomes of this study are consistent with Kotišová (2019) and Hackworth, (2021) who opined that during crises, journalists may influence the narrative significantly through their choice of words and frames.

Pandemic situations and major crises place more demands on journalists to share relevant and truthful information to help their audiences make sense of what is happening. The uncertainty and lack of understanding surrounding the pandemic was a major challenge because earlier studies (Hackworth, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021) reported that journalists' ability to report the pandemic effectively depended on their perceptions and understanding of the disease. This finding of the study is consistent with Colarossi (2020) who observed that the effective dissemination of information by journalists during public health crises can be significantly affected by the structure and composition of the media environment such as the availability of trusted expert news sources. The presence of misperceptions and myths that hampered effective risk communication during the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic confirms Anwar et al., (2020), assertion that misconceptions and myths about the pandemic are globally acknowledged as a major challenge for journalism because journalists through the media are the brokers of information in society.

#### **5.4 Recommendations**

The ensuing recommendations are based on the analysis of findings and the conclusions of the study.

First, media organisations must periodically organize training workshops on crises reporting for their journalist so that they would be ready to cover crisis more effectively.

Second, the Electronic Communications Act, 2008 Act 775 must be fully used to penalize people who disinform and misinform because their actions affect the quality of media coverage during pandemics.

Also, there is the need for formal educational institutions and National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) to promote Media and Information Literacy (MIL) skills among citizens to counter the spread of misinformation and fake news as these hamper media coverage of public health crises.

In addition, media owners must resource journalists to carry out their duties safely and effectively especially during public health crises.

Further, medical experts and other incident managers who have special knowledge must be encouraged to make themselves more available to journalists when they need them in crises moments.

#### **Suggestions for Future Studies**

Further studies could consider using alternative research designs such as content analysis to systematically examine the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic based on news stories available.

Future studies may also consider comparing the coverage of the pandemic in the broadcast and print media to draw out the similarities and nuances.





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## Appendix

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Kindly introduce yourself indicating your designation in the organisation and number of years you have worked in this position.
2. How would you describe your station's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What role did you play during the coverage of the pandemic?
4. Which special preparations did you make prior to the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Which arrangements did your organisation made to ensure that journalist report the COVID-19 pandemic effectively?
6. What were some of the concerns raised by the communities and the individuals during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?
7. Where were you getting the information for your listeners during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?
8. Which challenges did you encounter during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?
9. How did you mitigate the challenges?
10. In your view how what can be done to improve media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic?