PUBLIC HEALTH AND ITS POLITICAL FACE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES BEFORE THE MEDIA IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

[1]**Jacho David Sunday** *Ph.D.*
bovisunday60@gmail.com
[3]**Tsegyu Santas** *Ph.D.*
tsegyu@nsuk.edu.ng
&
[2]**Kelvin Inobemhe**
inobemhekelvin@gmail.com

[1]Department of Political Science, Nasarawa State University, Keffi
[2,3]Department of Mass Communication, Nasarawa State University, Keffi

Abstract
It is quite difficult for the public health community to acknowledge it has a political face. Public health by virtue of its nature is difficult to be separated from politics – therefore it has a political face that manifests especially in times of great public concerns such as the COVID-19 era. This study explores the issues and challenges that confronted the media in the containment of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Employing the library method of research, data were source from books, journals, internet and relevant literature, which has bearing with the subject of discourse. The social responsibility theory and the strategic communication model was deployed to underscore the responsibility of the mass media to report issues related to COVID-19 in the face of a daunting health epidemic situation amidst the political dimensions of politicking with the COVID-19 issue. Findings from the study demonstrated that the media had many challenges in balancing between social responsibility and issues of politics that engulf the COVID-19 phenomenon. Prominent among this problem is the apparent lack of transparency and disclosure of the statistics of people who were infected by COVID-19 and the lack of judicious utilization of funds made available by the government to contain the virus. Based on this finding, the study recommends a greater synergy between the media and governments officials to be on the same page when it comes to the coverage of future epidemics in Nigeria.
Keywords: Coronavirus, Public health, Media, Communication, Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

Somehow, the world has managed and defeated several epidemics and pandemics. Some came with political consequences, while other had social implications. Epidemics and pandemics always alter human's normal living and often times disrupt the usual and sometimes enthrone chaos. History shows that social and political disruptions often accompany epidemics (Goulart, 2005). Most times, such can come in form of people's reactions to government controls and regulations which are usually put in place to avoid full blown infections of the population. This is where the idea of public health comes in – where government attempts to cater for the well-being of the generality of the people.

Public health all over the world is concerned with the health needs of the mass of the people. It is public because it is meant for all. On one hand, public health in Nigeria has been strained due to lack of strong policy frameworks or institutions, and on the other, COVID-19 pandemic outbreak magnified the problems. It also exposed the political side of public health the world over. One would expect that during times of great worry due to the negative consequences of a pandemic, politics would not creep in. However, different countries witnessed one form of collision between politics and public health in varied manner. From the US to Europe and then Africa and Nigeria, the issue of politics and public health comes up. It is noteworthy that politics always play a critical role in public health. Cowper (2020) asserts that, a time where the world faces a dangerous respiratory disease of this magnitude is the worst time to witness a collision between public health and politics. It is important to state that public health is always political (Bias, 2020).

The disease assumed a dangerous dimension in North America, Asia, and Europe – though Africa was not left out. Coronavirus pandemic heaped a lot of pressure on Nigeria's public health. Though the nation seems to have managed the situation in a decorous manner, it is noteworthy that the disease has its toll on Nigeria's economic, political and social landscape. For example, several high profile persons reportedly contracted the virus while some casualties were also recorded. Nigeria began preparations to fight COVID-19 even before it was declared a pandemic in the first quarter of 2020. First reported in Wuhan, Hubei province of China, COVID-19 was designated a pandemic in February of 2020.

According to Campbell (2020), Coronavirus pandemic could have entered Nigeria from different locations which make up common destinations for the nation's elites – Egypt, Europe, the Gulf. However, the disease index case has been traced to an Italian who returned to the country from Milan (Maclean & Dahir, 2020). Though he was later tracked down for possible isolation, he initially beat the nation's so called alert mechanisms, and was able to find his way into Lagos and even to another state (Akwagyiram & Eboh, 2020).

The pandemic though curtailed in Nigeria after several measures were rolled out by the coordinating public institutions (Ministry of Health, Nigeria Center for Disease Control), and the team, that is, Presidential Task Force, mandated by the Nigerian government to help the nation pull through the possible health and humanitarian crisis that may arise as a result of COVID-19. The team was inaugurated with a mission to coordinate government response to the virus and mobilise the necessary resources towards leading the country out of the dangers that come with pandemics such as COVID-19.

The media at any given point in time has a responsibility to the society within which it operates. In fact, the media play significant roles in society especially democratic ones. The conduct of the media has to take cognizance of "public interest" (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017, p.51). According to Moemeke (2016), the position occupied by the mass media in the life of a nation cannot be over-emphasised as its duty of providing for the information, correlation, education and entertainment needs of society are of "inestimable value for the survival and development of any nation" (p.10).

In a COVID-19 era, the media cannot shy away from its responsibility. The media in Nigeria, just like its counterparts in other developing nations were faced with massive challenges ranging from the ones heaped on them as a result of national lockdown to the health risks, and then public health politics. However, the media played and is still playing its role in the fight against Coronavirus in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world. This paper investigates the issues, challenges before the media in the fight against COVID-19 with consideration of the political face public health assumed in the midst of the outbreak.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literatures abound on the relationship between public health and politics. Related literature also delved into themes such as the negative impact political influence can have on public health, the role of the media in public health, as well as the challenges faced by the media and others groups in a public health crisis such as COVID-19 pandemic. Such literature are reviewed hereunder.

According to Galea (2016) politics is a microsocial health determinant. Further, Galea avers that the health of a population is shaped by social, economic, and environmental factors or conditions, which in turn are subject to political control and interference. Galea states that politics is integral to the health and safety of the people as issues such as monetary policy, pollution control, and even appointment of judges who are saddled with the responsibility to decide on civil rights are all domiciled in the political bosom of elected representatives.

Similarly, Oliver (2006) asserts that, "politics, for better or worse, plays a critical role in health affairs" (p. 195). Oliver opines that politics is a central determining factor of how citizens and policy makers identify and understand problems when viewed within existing social conditions and policies, in

facilitating certain kinds of public health interventions but not others, and in generating a variety of challenges in policy implementation. According to Oliver, there are certain externalities that are consequent of private actions of members of society and such can affect others such as smoking, sexual practices, drunk driving. Therefore, government must come in to impose restrains for the protection of all.

That requires policy for the wellbeing of all. One of the most important ways government can influence the generality of the people is to prevent certain actions capable of hurting others in the society. Power and politics are relative and relational, and evidences exist that both can manifest at different levels of influence (Gore & Parker, 2019). Furthermore, Gore and Parker explain that such levels include policy decision making as well as local implementation of interventions of which public health could most times be the target. According to Erasmus and Gilson (2008), those in charge of care, which may include bureaucratic agents, administrators, and other frontline health workers may apply or exercise power in the course of everyday health service delivery – a situation that has negative or positive consequences for the people they serve. In other words, they may exercise some power with political undertone that could make or mar public health delivery programmes.

Political power has overbearing influence on public health. According to Brown (2010), public health officials most often work with government, and always have to deal with public distrust. Often times, they are always helpless when such issues arise. It also put a strain on their ability to lobby and mobilise resources for public health intervention. The fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria has suffered some setbacks especially as it relates to adherence to safety protocols suggested by public health institutions such as NCDC largely due to public distrust stemming from political corruption (Ezeibe et al., 2020). The foregoing also demonstrates that public health and politics are intertwined or better still – entwined. The implication of the foregoing is that political influence impacts public health and vice versa. As the case of Nigeria, issues in political domain can elicit negative reactions from the public regarding adherence to government guidelines for the protection of all just as negative political reactions can pose threat to public health.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The social responsibility theory and strategic communication model were used to underpin the study. The social responsibility theory is a brain child of the Hutchins Commission which is used often to explain or theorize present day press systems that espouse the responsibility of the press to the society. According to Ende (2013), citing Peterson, Schram (1956) and, Gunrantne and Hasim (1993), "at the centre of social responsibility theory is the major premise that freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press which enjoys a privileged position is obligated to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary democratic system". Quoting Bitner (1989), Lucas and Tergema (2018) consider that the theory originates from the United States of America. By the turn of the 20th century, the printed press had been through the era of yellow journalism (a kind of journalism characterized by reckless reporting and unethical practice). Prior to this era, the press, through the efforts of freedom fighters such as John Milton, John Erskine, Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill attained some considerable degree of freedom to operate without restrictions (formal/informal, constitutional or otherwise).

The theory formulated by the Commission on Freedom of the Press had categorically prescribed for the mass media to:

i. Provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning.
ii. Serve as a forum of exchange of comment and criticism.
iii. Project a representative picture of the constituent groups in society.
iv. Be responsible for the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society.
v. Provide full access to the day's intelligence.

In fulfilling their obligatory functions, the media should exhibit high-level professionalism in upholding the basic canon of the profession like truth, objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balance in their reportage of events in society. Thus the media is saddled with the responsibility to furnish the populace with critical information on the outbreak of viruses in the society so that they can make informed decision on how to take precaution.

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van,Vercic, & Sriramesh (2007) define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfill its mission. According to them strategic communication has to do with key concepts like audience analysis, goal setting, and message strategy. Hallahan and colleagues (2007) cited in Timm, Hum, Druckenmiller (2016) describe the use of strategic communication across many sectors, including corporations, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations. Strategic communication has been used frequently in health and other informational campaigns to either sell government policies or embark on aggressive public health campaign in order to arrest a threatening situation. For instance, during the battle against the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria government, media and NCDC alongside other key stakeholders engaged in strategic communication in order to make people aware that the virus is real. Therefore, different media outlets such social media, television and the radio were deployed to communicate to the populace. And this went a long way to engage the public domain in stemming the tide of the pandemic in Nigeria.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized library research technique to examine the issue under investigation. To this end, materials were sourced from journals, books, internet and media reports to execute the study.

4. COVID-19 AND THE POLITICS OF CARE AND PREVENTION IN NIGERIA

It is important to start this section of this paper with the example of previous US elections where politics of healthcare took the center stage. Right from the 2008 election campaigns, the issue of affordable healthcare has dominated political communication in the United States of America. The 44th president of the United States – Barack Obama in fulfillment of his electoral promises instituted Obamacare with the mandate to provide affordable care for all. The 2020 US election also saw healthcare as the central theme (Dauba-Pantanacce, 2020). While the contenders talk about health, voters in the country get interested in healthcare benefits especially in the area of affordability. Consequently, it is assertive to state that politics of care has in recent times play a key role in US elections and the 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020 elections saw popular themes with regards to public health policies.

In Nigeria, the politics of care can be seen from similar angle to that of the US, unless that this one is mainly about building hospitals. Political communication in Nigeria especially with respect to electioneering campaigns talks about the basics. Sometimes, it is about building hospitals, roads, electricity and creating jobs. Electioneering campaigns before the 2015 general elections in Nigeria also witnessed a similar trend, when the current president promised to end medical tourism in Nigeria – a situation where the political elites seek medical treatment abroad. President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria reportedly broke the promise when he himself travelled to London on medical tourism to treat ear infection after his inauguration (see BBC, 2016).

When properly analysed, President Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 Chatham House speech on how healthcare in Nigeria was allowed to deteriorate smacks of what could translate to mean that the president would not joke with healthcare delivery once he settles in office (Olafusi, 2018). Reports show that Nigeria loses up to 576 billion NGN to medical tourism (Muanya, Jimoh & Olaniyi, 2021). However, this can also be seen from the perspective of the politics of care or healthcare – where quality care promises are made as part of electioneering campaigns just to garner enough votes from those who really care about their health. There are lot of other similar examples of how past Nigerian leaders since independence who have made attempt at what we referred to as politics of care in this paper.

Another angle to see political aspect of public health is through the prism of politics of intervention. The popular maxim that "prevention is better than cure" is at play here. It is indeed an aspect of the political

face of public health. There are instances where political considerations influence the level of support for preventive actions (Romano, 2020). Further, Romano posits that "prevention specialists consider the political dynamics that may surround a prevention intervention proposal, whether on a small scale as in one school, or a large school district or community" (p.38-19). Public health reasoning and practice has inculcated "prevention as a fundamental principle (Mykhalovskiy & French, 2020). According to Mykhalovskiy and French, certain prevention measures "demonstrate that preventing the spread of infectious disease too often involves curtailing the liberties of those living in conditions of social and economic marginalisation in order to protect the health of those who are most privileged" (p.5).

Public health intervention with regards to prevention could be part of the total package to ensure a proper management of epidemics and pandemics. However, regardless of the excitement that may accompany an intervention that prevention specialists wish to implement, they must take cognizance of the political dynamics that surround an intervention. Romano (2020) admonishes that it is necessary for prevention specialists to carefully assess sources of support for and resistance to an intervention. An interesting twist that may however arise is that an intervention may enjoy adequate support in one locality or area or even within a group, but may lack support or receive outright rejection in another setting, group or locality. Therefore, Romano suggests that it is critical to pay careful attention in communicating with key stakeholders at the earliest stages of a prevention programmes.

Again, politics of prevention can be seen in the guidelines or recommendations in respect of coronavirus. As Romano (2020) rightly observed, COVID-19 pandemic unfolded certain interesting aspect of preventive recommendations. According to Romano, the guidelines or recommendations "to reduce the virus spread have exposed major differences among stakeholders, regions, and political beliefs" (p.39). Further, Romano points out that:

> The differences include social distancing and mask use recommendations and timelines to open businesses, face gatherings for religious purposes, and recreational areas. The core controversies center around economic issues, citizen health and well-being, and individual freedom versus the common good. Specialists from fields such as medicine and public health, and government officials debate the urgency and actions needed. The differences have become more disparate as the pandemic has evolved. Some become impatient with prevention recommendations as they impinge on personal freedoms and reduce sources of financial and social support and pleasure. (p.39)

In agreement with the foregoing, we can draw that in reality, there are political disagreements with the prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that such pose immediate and greater threats to public health and well-being. However, knowing about and considering differences among stakeholders are critically important for the success and sustainability of a prevention project. It is also imperative to note that since preventive guidelines would not sit well with everyone in society, there will always be some discordant tunes from virtually all angles of society. Additionally, the position of Romano (2020) that the implementation of programmes or projects geared towards prevention will often receive support or resistance in ways that reflect or mirror the larger population or mass of the people for which the prevention is planned and implemented. In other words, the onus rest with the people concerned or directly affected to react whether negative or positive towards the prevention programmes. In most cases, politics play a role in the position taken by a number of persons in society.

A careful observation of the range of public health measures aimed at controlling COVID-19 pandemic will reveal that there were push backs from various quarters as well. For example, people were asked to observe measures such as physical /social distancing, regular hand washing, mask wearing, isolation, quarantine, and many more. Agencies saddled with the responsibility to lead institutional fight against COVID-19 pandemic also announced temporary closure of public spaces, recommended testing, and embarked on contact tracing, all in a bid to stop the spread. Whereas many saw through it from the perspective of the higher good of being of benefit to public health, others simply viewed certain measures as inconveniencing and rebuffed government position. Ezeibe et al. (2020) simply believe it stemmed

from distrust of government by the people who most likely ignored prevention measures largely due to corruption.

Similarly, Mykhalovskiy & French (2020) observe that measures and the manner in which safety recommendations or protocols are enforced may aggravate structural inequalities based on intersections of race, gender, class and other dimensions of social differentiation. Therefore, Mykhalovskiy and French see the politics of prevention as a matter of tensions internal to the project of limiting the reach of infectious disease. Attempts at it also "reanimates longstanding social justice traditions associated with public health, while focusing attention on structural inequalities that, at times, are not fully addressed by other modalities of critique" (p. 6).

4.1. An Overview of the Devastating Effects of Pandemics and Epidemics

Pandemics and epidemics, no doubt, have psychological effects on people who witnessed them. It is the expectation of every citizen to see government take charge in navigating a nation through difficult times. From war times to epidemics and then pandemics, government or public institutions must act as coordinating authorities in a bid to navigate through difficult times. In fact, it is the simple reason they are put in the various offices. They owe a duty to the people to see to their protection and welfare at all times. However, when the government is not living up to expectations, it takes a toll on the public.

It is noteworthy that COVID-19 pandemic came at a time when the world had almost forgotten what a pandemic is all about. Right from the Spanish flu, the world seems to be aloof of a possible devastation that could accompany a pandemic of COVID-19 strength. Though over 50 million people died, once the Spanish flu was over, the world wanted to move, so no one wanted to still fixate on it (Little, 2020). Some of the mental health associated with the Spanish flu pandemic include inability to sleep, dizziness, mental distraction, depression, and work related problems such as lack of focus at work place (Mamelund, 2003, as cited in Eghigian, 2020).

However, history portrays the world as being able to always navigate its way out of pandemics. According to Little, though there was a recession after the pandemic and other issues, the world did not want to think about the devastating impact. It is noteworthy that, somehow, pandemics always take on a political face or portray a side akin to politics. For example, Goulart (2005) traces the political root of the Spanish flu to Spain's neutrality during World War I, and its citizen's show of sympathy towards Germans as chiefly behind naming the pandemic to connote its origin.

Ebola outbreak in West African region in 2014 is another example of the response of the world to an epidemic. A nation like Nigeria provided adequate response to the outbreak and was able to contain the spread. However, the West African regional response was not effective as there were reports of extensive delay (International Crisis Group, 2015). Further, International Crisis Group referenced a WHO document as prompting political pressure and aided in mobilisation of foreign aid to assist affected countries. Though the disease did not spread in Nigeria as much as it did in some neighboring countries such as Liberia, Serra Leone and the rest, it surely had psychological impact on the country's population. Psychological distress which loss of concentration, loss of sleep over, lack of happiness or depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are some of the psychological impact of Ebola on the Nigeria population (Mohammed et al., 2015).

4.2. COVID-19: The Need for Information in the Midst of Infodemic and Politics

COVID-19 pandemic came with loads of information. In the midst of so much information flowing offline and online, risks became magnified and public health threatened. The crisis occasioned by COVID-19 pandemic outbreak causes anxiety, followed by an infodemic of fake news (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2020). Infodemic refers to overabundance of information (misleading and false information inclusive) available offline and online (World Health Organisation 2020a).

Since coronavirus pandemic is the first in a digitized world where people rely heavily on social media and associated technology to communicate and get information, it becomes a difficult situation because of the type of information available. According to the World Health Organisation (2020a) same technology we rely upon to keep up connections and communication enables and amplifies infodemic that undermines global efforts at combating COVID-19 pandemic. For example, it is possible for fake news, myths and misinformation to cost lives – an example is the Ebola outbreak of 2014 which reportedly resulted in adverse consequences (Balami & Meleh, 2019), took two lives with several others hospitalised following self-medication with the use of salt and water (Neporent 2014). Similarly, with regards to COVID-19, the World Health Organisation avers that when people do not have correct information, and no tests are conducted, and campaigns to promote vaccination will likely not meet their targets – a situation that will make the virus to thrive continuously.

Information is important in man's daily living, but, there are critical times where information is much more important. Whereas useful information may appear really critical to man at all times, access to it is another thing especially in pandemic times. Access to information is much more important during pandemic than any other times because critical decisions that directly affects people are made – therefore access is key (Pousadela, 2020). Furthermore, Pousadela avers that health crisis situation require more of accurate information which could help save lives. People are supposed to be free to have access to information especially when such is as sensitive as health. For example, the origin of COVID-19 is traced to Wuhan, Hubei Province China – a country where freedom of association, expression, peaceful assembly and access to information is limited. Little wonder that until this moment the country has refused to share sensitive data as to the real origin of coronavirus with the WHO (see BBC, 2021; Page & Hinshaw, 2021).

The flow of information from the right sources is also a key component in the success or otherwise of a fight against disease especially those with pandemic status. According to Pousadela (2020), the difference between life and death in a pandemic is a dependent factor on whether the people enjoy free flow of accurate and vital information or is withheld by "self-serving state institutions" (para. 4). Expressed differently, in a pandemic, the more access people have to information, the likely their chances of pulling through the trouble times – and if otherwise, the consequences will also speak to ascertain such situations. As earlier observed, COVID-19 came in the age of over-abundance of information across physical and virtual platforms – chiefly led by the new media (social media – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram etc.). However, with such high volume of information comes fake news hoaxes, misinformation and many more, spreading with dangerous impact on public health of people in the world – and third world countries are worst hit largely due to weak institutions and inadequate resources. Weak institution in the sense that the available ones cannot always rise to the occasion to counter fake news and deliberate misinformation – and inadequate resources because the necessary tools are not always available to get to the people.

Nevertheless, people must have access to accurate information for a successful fight against COVID-19. As rightly observed, quality health information in respect to risk and danger would be a deciding factor as to the level of impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups (Reddy & Gupta, 2020). Again, we need to reiterate that risk communication is a key component of public health as early warning on the dangers of a particular disease and the need to adhere to safety protocols could help stave off ugly consequences of a full blown outbreak – that is, in the case of an epidemic or a pandemic. Lowbridge & Leask (2011) lend credence that "risk communication is fundamental to public health practice and critical to the success of any public health response" (p.34). Therefore, communicating with the public to ensure they understand the potential or real threats is a major function of risk communication and the media is a useful channel where such communication can conveniently take place.

4.3. Media in the Fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

According to Goulart (2005), epidemics have always had political and social implications because of their impact on different groups in society as equal reactions are often elicited by virtue of government's responses. In the case of COVID-19 in Nigeria, a lot of issues needed to be sorted out. The media in any society plays vital roles of providing for the information, education and entertainment needs of the people (Moemeka, 2016). Therefore, in the midst of so much confusion and issues occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, the media is expected to step in and perform its unique functions. Interestingly, this pandemic happens to be the first in a world where digital technology and social media use is on a massive scale (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2020b).

Though engaging with the media is important, it could also be a challenging task. However, in every society, the media has a duty to the people or the audience. Again, it is imperative to highlight that the aims, objective as well as goals, and processes of the media can differ from those of public health in a given country at a particular time. Health professionals may also have different agenda from the ones the media may attempt to push. According to Lowbridge and Leask (2011) the public health professional may have different aims from that of the media in the areas of timeframes, concepts of 'evidence' and the need for individual case examples. However, in a pandemic, there must be collaborations between the media and the public health professionals.

It is noteworthy that the media had a critical role to play in the fight against COVID-19. Such roles come under the umbrella of what Anwar et al. (2020) referred to as a *six component of mass media model* which according to them encompasses the roles of media put in categories in line with their functions. The roles are:

1. Public health communication which refers to the provision of adequate and accurate information with respect to public health objectives which include prevention, care and many more.
2. Health education –The media is expected to bring to the knowledge of the public all they need to know about the disease.
3. Strategies for social distancing – is one of the basic recommendations in the prevention of contagious infections.
4. Reduction of stigma, discrimination and prejudice – In the wake of COVID-19, media served as platforms for propagation and spread of prejudice in society especially with the stories relating to the origin of the disease.
5. Telemedicine - The world has always navigated away from unprecedented times through the use of telemedicine, and it is seen as a strategic step in sailing through situations of disasters, tornadoes, and wars (Anwar et al., 2020).
6. Managing infodemics - "Infodemic" is a term coined from two words, "information" and "epidemic", and refers to a spread of both accurate and inaccurate information in what can be described as "rapid and far-reaching" (Anwar et al., 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

The paper discussed the political face of public health and delved into issues and challenges faced before the media in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria. Public health by virtue of its nature is difficult to be separated from politics – therefore it has a political face that manifests especially in times of great public concerns such as the COVID-19 era. The political twist it often assumes flows from the idea that public health areas such as funding, policy direction and even planning relies on the political configuration of a society.

We conclude that though the challenges are daunting, the media in its trademark resilience came through in performance of their traditional duties of information, education and awareness creation as to the dangers of coronavirus pandemic. With constant reportage of the virus regardless of the health risk, the media once again showed that it is a force to reckon with in society – and the social responsibility principle is as important as any other.

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