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Tracking coverage of the 2014 – 2015 Ebola outbreak: the case study of News 24 and Times Live

Mubwandarikwa, Angela

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ABSTRACT

Three West African countries: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, were severely affected by the Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2015 (*Reuters, 2014;* Centres for Disease Control and Prevention). Although other countries, such as Nigeria were partly affected, the epidemic was quickly contained. The outbreak was described as 'unprecedented' due to the quick spread beyond the African borders and the huge number of deaths and confirmed cases (World Health Organisation, para. 1**,** 2015; Mazumdar, 2014). This study focuses on the coverage of the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak, and in particular at the coverage of the outbreak by two top South African online media outlets, *News 24* and *Times Live*. The size and influence of the chosen media outlets generally offer an indication of how other online media platforms in general fared with regards to the covering of the Ebola outbreak that killed thousands and affected many. A specific period of six months, between 23 March 2014, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak for the first time and in the month of August 2014, is analysed as this was the peak of the virus. Both qualitative and quantitative content analysis were employed as research methods for this study as they complement one another and provide a more balanced result. The agenda setting theory is mainly used for this study as it helped to enumerate and examine the prominent issues, themes and angles which the two news media outlets highlighted most, the frequency of coverage, types of sources used and origination of content, which are central to the agenda setting theory. These are the issues central to the agenda setting theory. Other theories or approaches used moderately were: framing, news values and churnalism. Overall, the findings indicate that although *News 24* and *Times Live* started reporting on Ebola on a slow note, key events pushed them to start prioritising Ebola as a big story of the day just as most Western media outlets. The nature of coverage contributed to unnecessary fear and panic as South Africa took some stern measures to try and keep Ebola out of its shores. The trend of using of the elite, such as International Non-Governmental Organisations and Government sources, as sources of information in health reporting remains in place, while those affected by Ebola remain in the periphery of the news agenda. In line with the framing theory, there were four main themes, which are transmission, death, fear and response to Ebola that were consistently covered by *News 24* and *Times Live*. The media is the 'mirror' of the society, more could have been done to ensure they reflect what was happening in as far as the Ebola outbreak was concerned by putting out more self–generated analytical stories with multiple voices.