

Comparative Analysis of COVID-19 Media Coverage in Zambia: Ownership, Framing, and Discourse in the Times of Zambia and The Mast

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Abstract

This study analyses how media ownership influenced COVID-19 coverage in Zambia through a comparative analysis of the Times of Zambia and The Mast. The study utilised a convergent mixed-methods design, and integrates quantitative content analysis (n=170) and qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (n=30). Drawing on Framing Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Political Economy perspectives, the study analyses differences in framing, sourcing patterns, tone, and discursive construction of authority. The findings indicate that state-owned media prioritised government response frames and institutional authority, while privately owned media portrayed a relatively higher emphasis on accountability and socio-economic impacts. However, both the Times of Zambia and The Mast demonstrated high dependence on government sources. The study contributes to African media scholarship by showing how ownership structures shape not only framing patterns but also the discursive construction of crisis narratives. It recommends increased source diversity and strengthened editorial independence to enhance media accountability during public health crises.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis, COVID-19, Media Coverage, Ownership, Framing, Discourse, Zambia, The Mast

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted both a public health emergency and a communication crisis, placing the media the primary source of information and shaping public perception of the evolution of the pandemic. Newspapers played a critical role in shaping public understanding, influencing compliance with health measures, and shaping perceptions of risk and responsibility. However, media coverage is not neutral, as it is defined by institutional structures, which include ownership, which influence framing, sourcing, and discourse (Shoemaker, Reese, 2014).

In Zambia, the media is comprised of both state-owned and privately owned media institutions, making it a useful context for analysing how media ownership influences crisis reporting. Existing studies in African media contexts highlight the dominance of official sources and institutional narratives during health crises, however, there is limited research integrating framing, discourse, and political economy perspectives within a comparative design (McCombs and Shaw 1991; McQuail 2010)

This study addresses this gap by examining how two newspapers the Times of Zambia which is government owned and The Mast, that is privately owned, constructed COVID-19 narratives. The study seeks to find out how media ownership shapes framing, sourcing, and discursive representation of authority during a pandemic.

Contribution of the Study

- This study contributes to African media scholarship in three ways:
- It provides empirical evidence from Zambia, an under-researched media context.
- It demonstrates the value of integrating content analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis.
- It advances understanding of how ownership structures shape both framing patterns and discursive power relations.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Media Ownership and Crisis Reporting

Shoemaker & Reese (2014) state that media ownership determines the editorial structure and news production processes. This is further supported by several studies undertaken in Africa that indicate that state-owned media have a tendency to align with government narratives, while privately owned media attains an adversarial role against government or authority, while maintaining a relatively independent editorial (Apuke, 2016; Tadesse, 2015).

2.2 Framing Theory

According to the framing theory, the media select and emphasize certain aspects of reality to shape audience interpretation of events (Entman, 1993). Entman defines framing as the process through which the media emphasizes certain aspects of news coverage, while trivializing others. By doing so, the media shape audience understanding, influence responsibility attribution, and guide how the public perceive situations and of solutions. During pandemics, such as the during the outbreak of the COVID-19, dominant frames often included public health information, government response, and socio-economic impact.

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA examines how language constructs meaning and social realities (Fairclough, 1995). It is particularly useful in identifying how authority is legitimized while dissent is marginalized in media discourse.

2.4 Political Economy Perspective

The political economy approach (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) explains how structural factors such as ownership, advertising, and regulation shape media content. In Zambia, economic dependency and regulatory frameworks influence editorial practices, (Hamusokwe 2018).

2.5 Conceptual Framework

In this study media ownership is conceptualized as the independent variable influencing how the COVID-19 is represented in print media coverage in Zambia.

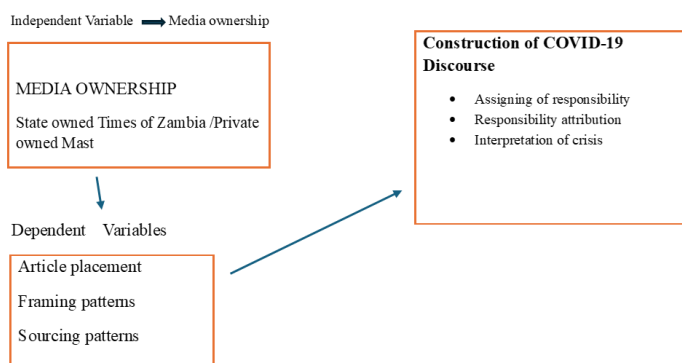


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 illustrates the underlying assumptions of this study regarding the influence of media ownership on the construction of COVID-19 discourse in Zambia. The framework identifies media ownership as the independent variable, categorized into state-owned and privately owned newspapers, specifically the Times of Zambia and The Mast. The dependent variables, derived directly from the study objectives, include article placement, framing patterns, and sourcing patterns. This implies that the nature of COVID-19 coverage is influenced by how ownership structures shape editorial decisions regarding what issues are prioritized, how they are framed, and whose voices are represented.

The framework further incorporates discursive construction as an analytical dimension, recognizing that meaning is not

only shaped by content but also by language use. Drawing on Framing Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study assumes that media texts construct reality through selective emphasis and linguistic choices that reflect underlying power relations (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998).

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), which integrated quantitative content analysis, with 170 selected articles and qualitative CDA.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

300 articles published between December 2020 and March 2021 were collected from the newspaper print archives. The articles were purposively selected to ensure only relevant articles formed the data set.

Table 1: Sample Distribution

Newspaper	Number of Articles
Times of Zambia	98
The Mast	72
Total	170

3.3 Variables and Coding

Table 2: Coding variables

Variable	Description
Article Placement	Front page/Inside page
Frame type	Dominant interpretive frame
Source Type	Government, Expert, negative
Article Length	Word Count

3.4 Frame Typology

Table 3: Frame Categories

Frame Type	Description
Public Health	Health guidelines
Government Response	Policy actions and intervention
Scientific / Medical expertise - driven Narratives	Expert -

3.5 Intercoder Reliability

Cohen's Kappa indicated substantial agreement (≥ 0.75) across variables, confirming coding reliability.

4 Results

4.1 Framing patterns

The Times of Zambia mainly used government response frames, while The Mast emphasized accountability and socio-economic impact.

4.2 Source Distribution

Table 4:

Source	Dominance
Government	High
Experts	Moderate
Citizens	Low

Both newspapers relied heavily on elite institutional sources.

Tone of Coverage

Coverage was predominantly neutral, characterized by technical and administrative language.

Placement and Prominence

Most articles appeared on inside pages, indicating moderate prominence.

4.3 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that media ownership and ideological structure of the media shape media coverage and editorial policies during crises. This is consistent with political economy theory which posits that media owned by government, in this case the Times of Zambia reinforce institutional authority, while privately owned media like in this case, The Mast highlight a more critical framing.

In the case of Times of Zambia and the Mast However, both newspapers displayed:

- Government source dominance
- Neutralized discourse
- Limited representation of marginalized voices

In relation to CDA, neutrality functions as an ideological strategy that legitimizes institutional authority by minimising contested views. These findings align with a broad range of previous research which have indicated a high dependence on official government sources (Hamusokwe et. al. 2022)

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study indicates that media ownership plays a significant role in shaping public perception crisis communication. There is significant evidence that both the Times and Mast newspapers have differing ideological and structural orientation and that both are embedded in these ideological and structural constraints.

Recommendations

- Need for greater media source diversity
- Importance of balanced media coverage
- Strengthening editorial independence of media

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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