

# A Comparative Discourse Analysis of African Newspaper Reports on Global Epidemics: A Case Study of Ebola and Coronavirus



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**Abstract** This qualitative multi-case study analyses how two African newspapers engaged in self-presentation of African countries and other-presentation of Western countries when reporting on the outbreak of diseases. Using van Dijk’s ideological square as a framework, the study undertakes a discourse analysis of news reports on the 2014 Ebola outbreak and the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak reported by the South African daily broadsheet, the *Sowetan*, and the Nigerian daily broadsheet, the *Daily Trust*. The analysis shows that in their reports on European countries and the United States of America, the discourse’s macro- and microstructures emphasised the positive features of Western nations and de-emphasised the negative ones. Conversely, concerning African countries, there was a tendency to de-emphasise the positive while emphasising the negative ones. As a result, the newspaper reports were found to engage in negative self-presentation of African countries and positive other-presentation of Western countries, perpetuating the “us vs them” ideology that newspapers from Europe and America employ when reporting on the outbreak of diseases in Africa.

**Keywords** Ebola · Coronavirus · Us vs them ideology · Newspapers · Discourse analysis · van Dijk

## Introduction

The outbreak of a disease, whether local or global, is not merely a public health matter. It is also a health communication issue, as people require information to help them respond accordingly. As citizens require more and more information to make decisions amid the fear and dread that can ensue, established information sources, such as newspapers, become critical in shaping how the crisis is understood and responded to by the public. However, beyond providing information, research has found that these media sources advance ideologically laden meanings for their

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audiences through the discourses they use (Williams and Julia 2009; van der Meer and Piet 2013; Witte 1992). This is undoubtedly the case when it comes to news media reports on global epidemics and pandemics. There is an extensive body of literature, for example, that links the news media's inclination to use militaristic discourse in reference to the HIV/Aids pandemic to the stigma that those infected by the disease bear (Treichler 1992; Sherwin 2001). More recently, studies have argued that news media reports engaged in "fear-mongering" in the discourse they used when reporting on the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak in China by "presenting the Coronavirus as a deadly living thing" and emphasising the global spread of the pandemic (Chaiuk and Olha 2020, p. 184).

As audiences try to make sense of what is happening in their country and how the outbreak is affecting the rest of the world, the scholarship argues that news media perspectives become a critical window through which people look to understand of what is unfolding. In this respect, considerable research exists on how news media from Western nations, particularly America and European countries, report on the outbreak of diseases in other parts of the world (Gerlach 2016; Stevens and Shownika 2013; Stephenson and Michelle 2009). These studies confirm that when Western newspapers report on these outbreaks concerning Africa, their discourse is undergirded by colonial perspectives that deem Africans as primitive, poor and powerless people who can only navigate health crisis with aid from the West (Gerlach 2016). As a result, we have evidence that Western media depictions are prone to perpetuate Africa's images as the dark continent prone to "death, disaster, disease and despair" (Hunter-Gault 2006). The literature finds that when it comes to Africa, Western media naturalises an interpretation of developments, including disease outbreaks, in ways that the discourse employed misrepresents Africa (Jarosz 1992), and portrays Africans as the inferior and dangerous other (Washer 2004). In doing this, they perpetuate an ideology of othering that emphasises the West as superior and Africa as inferior. Niel Gerlach's (2016) study on English newspaper coverage of Ebola found one of the dominant frames employed emphasised the West as a source of aid. In these reports African cultural practices were also alluded to as the cause of the outbreak of diseases (Gerlach 2016). Similarly, in Gabore's (2020) study on American and Chinese news reports on Africa and Coronavirus, the author found Western media's dominant frames were those of conflict and negativity.

The studies referenced above show that news reports on health matters should not be taken at face value as objective texts that provide an unbiased and objective account. Instead, their ideologically laden content should be read critically to evaluate the perspectives being advanced (Dudo et al. 2007; Luisi et al. 2018; Davis and Davina 2020). Samuel Gabore argues that through their choice of discourse, news media constructs reality for its audience in how they "present a particular consideration of a situation and then report evidence to strengthen, legitimise and naturalise the interpretation" (Gabore 2020, 299). Roger Fowler states that "news is not just a value-free reflection of facts. Anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position" (Fowler 1991, 101). Thus, when consideration is given to how a particular pandemic is understood and even experienced, consideration must be given to media coverage of this

outbreak since these platforms are the primary means through which people obtain information. Furthermore, one cannot read the media report uncritically, assuming they are merely providing information. One must be mindful of the ideologies that are also being communicated through these platforms because they shape how meaning is made amid the chaos of a disease outbreak.

What also emerges from the literature is that studies on news media coverage of pandemics tends to focus on how Western publications report on developments in Africa with minimal scholarship on how African countries report on these outbreaks in other African countries, and even less on how African countries report on the outbreak of diseases in Western countries. There appears to be a gap in research that explores how African news media reports on epidemics and pandemics that affect the rest of the world. Research exploring the discourse employed by African newspapers when reporting on disease outbreaks, not just in other African countries but also in Western nations, seems scant. Furthermore, there do not appear to have been many studies undertaken that analyse the type of discourses employed by African publications when reporting on disease outbreaks in Western nations and whether these discourses are the same as those used about African countries.

The purpose of this qualitative multi-case study is to analyse how two African newspapers report on global epidemics. Using van Dijk's (2000) ideological square as a framework, the study undertakes a discourse analysis of news reports on the 2014 Ebola outbreak and the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak as reported by the South African daily broadsheet, the *Sowetan*, and the Nigerian daily broadsheet, the *Daily Trust*. It considers the discourse used when engaged in self-presentation of African countries and other-presentation of Western countries, mainly European countries and the United States of America. Of particular interest is the "us vs them" ideology advanced in African newspapers' discourse on global epidemics.

## Conceptual Framework

Because of the pervasiveness of news discourse due to the sheer reach of news media, a discourse analysis of these texts helps one ascertain the "connections between discourse practices, social practices, and social structures, connections that might be opaque to the layperson" (Xie 2018, p. 399). Through discourse analysis, one can examine the unacknowledged ideologies that are being communicated in news texts on pandemics. One of the theorists in discourse analysis, Teun van Dijk, advances two concepts that are relevant to this study. The first relates to the scheme of discourse wherein he posits that texts are composed of three structures that support the overall meaning that can be read into them (van Dijk 1985). The first are macrostructures which give the overall theme of a text. The second are superstructures, which are about how the text is organised. The third are microstructures, focused on the sentence level and considers aspects such as syntax, rhetoric and sentence structure. In newspapers, van Dijk posits that to analyse the macrostructures of the news discourse, one must look to the headlines; for the superstructures,

one must look at how the news report is arranged; for the microstructures, one must look at the sentences and words used. Due to scope, for this study, only the macro- and microstructures are considered.

The second van Dijkean concept used in this study is his ideological square framework (van Dijk 2000). This framework is rooted in a view of discourse as something that advances ideology, particularly in how it includes and esteems through references to “us,” and excludes or disparages through reference to “them.” This “us vs them” perspective is commonly known as othering or otherness. When it comes to news media, it asserts that Western news coverage of African countries tends to portray these nations as the inferior other (Ebo 1997). In this respect, van Dijk argues that language that alludes to “us” is associated with favourable properties, while language that alludes to “them” is associated with negative properties. From this, he derives an ideological square framework made up of the following four principles:

Emphasise positive things about Us  
Emphasise negative things about Them  
De-emphasised negative things about Us  
De-emphasise positive things about Them. (van Dijk 2000; Ramanathan and Bee Hoon 2015)

Based on this, the study considers the news reports based on their headlines and at a sentence level. It analyses discursive expression of the “us vs them” ideology to postulate on whether, and how, African newspaper discourse on pandemic and epidemics conforms to or challenges a Western orientation of othering African countries. This study seeks to fill the gap that considers how African news media reports on developments on the continent as well as in Western nations concerning the outbreak of diseases.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This is a multi-case comparative study that considers two publications—*The Sowetan*, a daily broadsheet from South Africa and the *Daily Trust*, a Nigerian daily broadsheet. These newspapers are among the most widely read and distributed in their respective countries (Hassan and Mohd 2018; Cowling 2014). The newspaper articles were published over two 31-day periods: 1 August 2014–31 August 2014 for Ebola and 23 March 2020–23 April 2020 for the COVID-19 pandemic (Coronavirus). These periods were chosen because they marked a significant development in the Ebola and Coronavirus outbreak, respectively, and thus marked growing media coverage in the countries being considered. The first period in 2014 was chosen because it came a week after Nigeria reported its first Ebola-related death, marking the beginning of the Ebola outbreak in the country (World Health Organisation

2014). The second 31-day period, which was in 2020, was chosen because on 23 March 2020, South Africa announced it would be going into a national lockdown to try and mitigate the spread of Coronavirus.

The weakness of case studies as a research approach is that they are very specific to the cases they consider (Houghton et al. 2013). As such, there are limitations to the extent to which they can be generalised. By choosing to focus on these two disease outbreaks, and how these two specific publications reported on them, it cannot conclusively be said that this is generalisable to African newspapers as a whole. Given that the purpose was to undertake a discourse analysis, this limitation is expected since this analysis approach often considers fewer texts to examine them with greater depth.

### ***Data Collection***

Online versions of the physical newspapers were obtained from the digital newspaper repository, *Press Reader*. A search was done for the word “Ebola” in the papers’ 2014 editions and a search for “Coronavirus” in the 2020 editions. These search terms were used because for each of the respective periods, the study was concerned with only those reports dealing with the particular disease that was topical in that year, namely Ebola in 2014 and Coronavirus in 2020. From this, only those articles that were deemed to be news reports were considered, including sports news. This means that items that were deemed to be opinion pieces, feature articles, profile interviews and the like were excluded. The researcher then read through the remaining articles, and a second set of exclusion was made to remove all of the newspaper reports based on developments in the country where the publication was based. For the *Sowetan*, this meant excluding all articles that were about developments in South Africa. Similarly, for the *Daily Trust*, all the articles that were about Nigeria were excluded. This is because the study was specifically concerned with these newspapers’ discourse when reporting on other countries, not domestic developments. After these exclusions were effected, 318 news reports remained, and based on these, the analysis was undertaken.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis was primarily qualitative, however, some aspects needed to be quantified to make sense of the discourse that emerged. These included the number of newspaper articles dealing with international developments on each of the outbreaks, the number of publications written by local reporters compared to the number taken from international wire services such as Reuters and AFP, and which countries were mentioned in the news reports. It was important to quantify these aspects because they assisted in gauging how international developments were

prioritised. In the case of who wrote the stories, the quantities revealed how much of the discourse in these newspaper articles originated from local reporters and how much originated from the international wire services. Finally, by quantifying which countries were mentioned the most, one can ascertain where the priority of coverage was and which countries were deemed not to be relevant enough to be reported on.

The qualitative analysis, which is the core of the study, was done using van Dijkian approaches. The starting point of the analysis was to examine the macrostructure of the publications' news discourse by considering the overall themes dealt with as articulated in the headlines. From this, the twelve topics captured in Table 1 were deemed to be the main themes covered by these African newspapers concerning global developments around the Ebola virus in 2014 and Coronavirus in 2020:

While twelve topics emerged from the headlines, to engage in a thorough discussion of the discourse's microstructures, some of these topics were collapsed into others, while some topics were not considered for discussion. Thus all of the stories that dealt with the infection, death, and recovery of individuals; stories that were about individuals who were thought to be infected but were not; as well as stories that quantified the rates of infection and death were collapsed into one topic, namely: "Stories about Infections, Deaths and Recoveries." Likewise, the stories on the economic impact and those about requests for assistance were collapsed into one topic: "Stories about Economic and Financial Implications." Stories that were not analysed are those that dealt with the impact of the virus on individuals because some of these stories did not adequately identify where the individual was from. The analysis did not deal with stories about general information on the virus because these reports were not focused on a specific country and often referenced several countries. The remaining topics therefore are:

- Topic 1: Stories about Infections, Deaths and Recoveries
- Topic 2: Stories about Financial Implications
- Topic 3: Stories about the Domestic Developments in Individual Countries (excluding South Africa when it comes to the *Sowetan* and Nigeria when it comes to the *Daily Trust*)

Based on these three topics, the news discourse's microstructure was considered by looking at how words were used and sentences structured to articulate the "us vs them" perspective.

## Findings and Discussion

Figure 1 shows the coverage of both the 2014 Ebola and 2020 Coronavirus outbreaks, news reports that mentioned countries on the African continent dominated the coverage. From a macrostructure perspective, this aspect of the African newspapers' discourse challenges Western newspapers, where Africa is usually given minimal coverage (Bunce 2015).

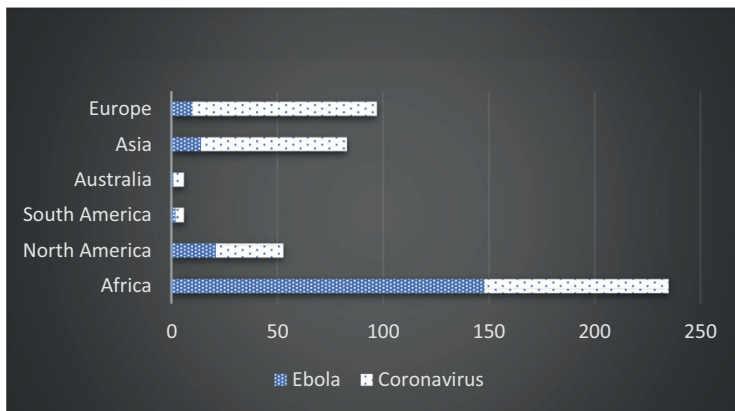
**Table 1** Overall themes based on the article headlines

Topic	Example of headline
Headlines that quantified the death and infection rates from the virus	LIBERIA RECORDS MOST NEW EBOLA DEATHS ( <i>Sowetan</i> , 20-Aug-14) ITALY REPORTS 602 NEW CORONAVIRUS DEATHS ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 24-Mar-20)
Headlines about individuals who had recovered from the virus	US DOCTOR RECOVERS FROM EBOLA ( <i>Sowetan</i> 22-Aug-14) CORONAVIRUS: BORIS JOHNSON DISCHARGED FROM HOSPITAL ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 13-Apr-20)
Headlines about individuals infected with the virus	NEWLY-WED LAGOS NURSE INFECTED WITH EBOLA ( <i>Daily Trust</i> 12-Aug-14) FELLAINI IS FIRST CORONAVIRUS CASE IN CHINESE SUPER LEAGUE ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 23-Mar-20)
Headlines about individuals who died from the virus	LIBERIAN VICTIM KNEW HE HAD EBOLA BEFORE TRAVELLING TO NIGERIA—REPORT ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 8-Aug-14) TOP HIV SCIENTIST, GITA RAMJEE DIES OF CORONAVIRUS ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 2-Apr-20)
Headlines about suspected cases of the virus that turned out to be negative	NIGERIAN SUSPECTED OF EBOLA TESTS NEGATIVE IN HONG KONG ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 11-Aug-14) BOTSWANA PRESIDENT TESTS NEGATIVE FOR COVID-19 ( <i>Sowetan</i> , 2-Apr-20)
Headlines about the impact of the virus on the economy	EBOLA, FLIGHTS CANCELLATIONS AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 27-Aug-14) AFRICA, ASIA POOR TO BEAR THE BRUNT OF ECONOMIC FALLOUT ( <i>Sowetan</i> , 1-Apr-20)
Headlines about Western countries providing aid to African countries affected by the virus	UN TO STEP UP ON EBOLA ( <i>Sowetan</i> , 25-Aug-14) FG SEEKS N2.56TRN FROM WORLD BANK, IMF, OTHERS ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 7-Apr-20)
Headlines about the impact of the virus on planned global events	FG RULES OUT HAJJ FOR ANYONE WITH EBOLA VIRUS ( <i>Daily Trust</i> , 15-Aug-14) TOUR DE FRANCE PUT ON ICE BY VIRAL OUTBREAK ( <i>Sowetan</i> , 16-Apr-20)
Headlines about the impact of the virus on individuals	JOHN KANI FEELS VIRUS SETBACK ( <i>Sowetan</i> , 24-Mar-20)

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

Topic	Example of headline
	MY EXPERIENCE AT ISOLATION CENTRE—COVID-19 SURVIVOR <i>(Daily Trust, 31-Mar-20)</i>
Headlines about the domestic developments in individual countries (excluding South Africa when it comes to the <i>Sowetan</i> and Nigeria when it comes to the <i>Daily Trust</i> )	LIBERIA ORDERS EBOLA VICTIMS' BODIES CREMATED <i>(Daily Trust, 5-Aug-14)</i> ZIM ROLLS OUT ITS LOCKDOWN <i>(Sowetan, 31-Mar-20)</i>
Headlines about general information concerning the virus	THERE'S NO EBOLA CURE, BUT EARLY INTENSIVE TREATMENT BOOSTS SURVIVAL <i>(Daily Trust, 7-Aug-14)</i> TIPS FOR TAMING THE EBOLA SPREAD <i>(Daily Trust, 12-Aug-14)</i>
Headlines about the implications of the virus on the African continent specifically	AFRICA, ASIA POOR TO BEAR THE BRUNT OF ECONOMIC FALLOUT <i>(Sowetan, 1-Apr-20)</i> WHO WARNS OF WORRYING COVID19 TREND IN AFRICA <i>(Daily Trust, 23-Apr-20)</i>



**Fig. 1** Number of news reports by continent

Figure 2 shows how the apparent focus on Africa is markedly distorted when one considers the coverage of specific countries. The blue bars, which represent news reports on Ebola, show that other than Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, which were the countries with the highest Ebola infection rates in 2014, the country that these African newspapers reported on the most was America. However, when it comes to the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak, three of the four most reported on countries are Western countries, which incidentally had very high infection and death rates, namely America, Italy and England. The fourth most mentioned country is China,



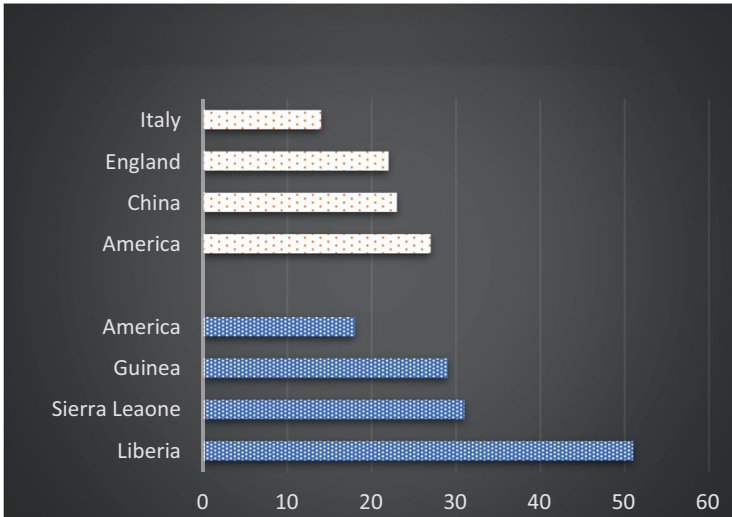


Fig. 2 Number of news stories by country

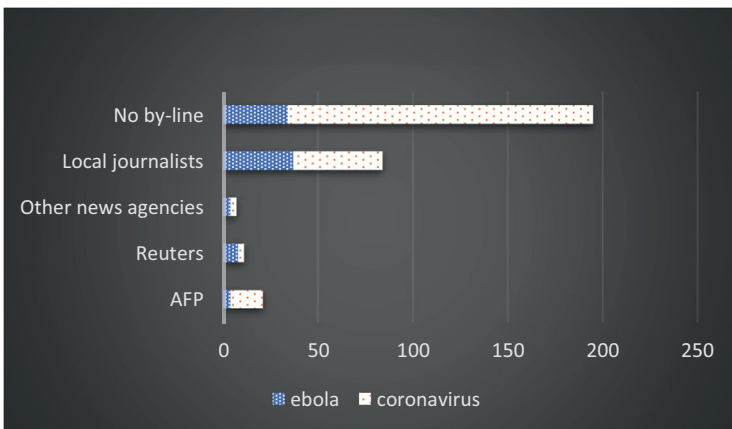


Fig. 3 By-lines of reports

from where the outbreak originated. Thus, while the continent overall received much coverage for the Coronavirus reports, individual African countries did not get focused coverage to the degree that Western countries did.

The final aspect of the data to be quantified is the source of the news reports, as depicted in Fig. 3. Only about a quarter of these news reports were by-lined by local journalists. The rest were from international news wire services such as Reuters and AFP. Two-thirds were not by-lined at all, which suggests that they too were from an international wire service. This information is relevant for discourse analysis because it points to the origins of the news discourse in these African publications,

namely wire services based in Western countries. Of course, newspapers often edit the material from these wire services to make it suitable and relevant for their readers. However, even with the prerogative to alter the texts, the discourse's overall macrostructures were largely intact because the report's topic was unchanged. In the following section, consideration is given to the study's qualitative aspects, namely the news reports' discourse, using the van Dijkean ideological square.

### ***Topic 1: Stories About Infections, Deaths and Recoveries***

If one considers how the death rates were reported, it can be seen that in the case of Ebola, which killed mainly Africans, the reporting on the death rate was always accompanied by a stipulation describing the disease as deadly. An example of this is the following reference:

Fear about a possible spread of the deadly virus. . . More than 700 people in West Africa have died from Ebola, a haemorrhagic virus with a death rate of up to 90 percent of those infected. (*Daily Trust*, 5 August 2014)

Contrast this to reports on Coronavirus, which, as of February 2021, had killed more than 2 million people. Fatalities in Western countries due to the virus were frequently reported using less descriptive language, merely stating the figure, as shown in this report:

The United States recorded 1509 deaths related to the Coronavirus pandemic over the last 24 hours. . . The number of fatalities was similar to the previous days' toll. (*Daily Trust*, 14 April 2020)

One observes an emphasis on the negative impact of Ebola on Africans and a de-emphasis on the fact that thousands of people were dying daily in America due to the Coronavirus pandemic. We also see a de-emphasis on the fact that with Coronavirus, African countries had considerably lower rates of infections and fatalities. These low infection and death rates run counter to the West's overall negative perspective of Africa as a continent ill-equipped to deal with the outbreak of diseases (Jarosz 1992). In the news reports considered, there is no postulating on why the rates were so low for Africans; it is a topic that is altogether ignored and hence de-emphasised.

Looking at news reports on specific individuals who were infected or died due to either of these two viruses, the tendency observed was one that emphasised the humanity and positive traits of affected Western individuals while either anonymising or writing negatively about African individuals. This was particularly evident in news reports on Ebola.

The first European infected by a strain of Ebola that has killed more than 932 people in West Africa, Spanish priest Miguel Pajares, was stable in Madrid. (*Daily Trust*, 8 August 2014)

Here one sees the infected person is named, and the report goes as far as to tell us he is a priest, a role that carries positive connotations. However, on the other hand,

words like “imposter” and “suspect” are used in reference to the first person who died during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Nigeria, Patrick Sawyer:

who had direct contact with the Liberian Ebola ‘imposter’. (*Daily Trust*, 13 August 2014)

The phrase “runaway nurse” was used concerning a nurse infected with Ebola but left the quarantine site without the officials’ knowledge. (*Daily Trust*, 15 August)

Concerning Coronavirus, most of the deceased named were well-known Africans, and the reports foreground their occupation and sometimes medical history when reporting about their deaths. The reports also frequently made mention of their travel history:

The Nigeria centre for disease control yesterday confirmed engineer Suleiman Achimugu as the first fatality from COVID-19. The 67-year old Achimugu reportedly died in Abuja after returning to Nigeria following a medical procedure in the United Kingdom. The NCDC said he had underlying medical conditions including multiple myeloma and diabetes and that he was also undergoing chemotherapy. (*Daily Trust*, 24 March 2020)

In several of these reports on Africans who died of Coronavirus, there was explicit mention of the fact that the victim had travelled abroad. This matters when one considers the fact that these overseas countries were the ones with high infection rates. The story did not explicitly say it, but by mentioning the victim’s travel history, it implied that the victim could have been infected while abroad. The view that by mentioning the travel history of victims, the insinuation is that the virus was contracted there, is further supported in reports such the one headlined “Rwanda’s cases nearly double in a day, Ghana confirms 2nd death,” which went on to state: “Of the confirmed cases, 20 are Ghanaians—majority of whom returned home from affected countries, while seven are foreign nationals from Norway, Lebanon, China, France and the UK.” The language distanced the African countries concerned to point out that the growing number of cases in these contexts were being brought in by nationals who had been abroad.

Also, the third person to die of COVID-19 complications in the Democratic Republic of Congo is a respected human rights lawyer and aided of President Felix Tshisekedi. .He is likely to have contracted the respiratory illness during his trip to France for a medical check-up. (*Daily Trust*, 26 March 2020)

## ***Topic 2: Stories About Economic and Financial Implications***

The second topic for consideration was news reports on the economic and financial implication of the epidemics. The issue of the economic impact of the respective viruses was reported in three ways. Firstly, those news stories specifically outlined how African economies would fare in the wake of the virus. This usually expressed a negative outlook, emphasising that because these economies were not strong going into the pandemic, the effects of the disease outbreak, such as lockdowns and a

strained fiscus due to the more significant health needs, meant that they would be more weakened going forward.

The lockdowns are causing hardship across the world but particularly in impoverished cities in Africa and Asia. . . “Two weeks is too long. I don’t know how we will cope,” said (Nigerian) student Abdul Rahim, 25 as he helped his sister sell food from a market stall. Impoverished Zimbabwe also began enforcing a three-week lockdown. (*Sowetan*, 1 April 2020)

Africa’s negative economic situation is emphasised by highlighting the accounts of individuals who were already living in poverty before the outbreak and generalising these as “evidence” of these so-called pending hardships. It is most probable that if people who sell food in market stalls in Western nations were also interviewed, they would express the same sort of dread that these African fruit sellers expressed. This suggests that the example used to point to particular hardship in Africa was employed to emphasise a hardship applicable to fruit sellers irrespective of nationality. Conversely, when alluding to Western economies’ recovery prospects, the reports quoted forecasts that referred to strengths that these economies possess that would enable them to bounce back. For example, a report in the 24 March edition of the *Daily Trust* put it as follows:

“Advanced economies are generally in a better position to respond to the crisis,” she said in a statement “Georgieva, however warned that many emerging markets and low-income countries face ‘significant challenges,’ noting there are already capital outflows from poorer nations.” (*Daily Trust*, 24 March 2020)

The forecast seemed to emphasise that because these countries’ economies were advanced before the crisis, they would be better placed in their responses. No elaboration was provided as to why this view was justified. This was despite the fact that several of these Western countries with advanced economies had longer lockdowns, more infections and deaths, and more millions of people who lost their jobs (World Bank 2020).

Finally, when looking at aid issues around the outbreaks, the reports were overwhelmingly about African countries asking and Western countries giving.

Health Minister, Onyebuchi Chukwu yesterday said the United States has not yet responded to Nigeria’s request for supply of the experimental drug used for treatment of the Ebola virus. (*Daily Trust*, 8 August 2014)

[South African] President Cyril Ramaphosa called for richer countries to help African nations deal with the economic fallout. (*Daily Trust*, 27 March 2020)

These accounts emphasise the negative perspective of African countries as needy (Jarosz 1992) and the positive perspective of Western countries as having access to resources to assist their own citizens and donate to African countries in need.

Another peculiarity is that there were instances where it would appear that an African country had paid for medical supplies, and yet that was not clear because of how the report had been phrased. An example is a story headlined “COVID-19: fg takes delivery of medical supplies from Turkey” filed on 6 April in the *Daily Trust*. The first few lines read:

The federal government at the weekend took delivery of first batch of medical supplies to contain the spread of Coronavirus pandemic and for treatment of COVID-19 patients. . . It was learnt that the flight left Nigeria early Saturday for the seven-hour flight to Turkey, lifted supplies and returned to Nigeria before midnight. (*Daily Trust*, 6 April 2020)

The article described the flight details without clearly spelling out that the Nigerian government procured these supplies. Since “from Turkey” was emphasised in the headline, the headline could be read as implying that Turkey donated these supplies. Only at the end of the article, when it says, “The Chief Operating Officer of Air Peace, Toyin Olajide, commended the federal government for its efforts to combat the Coronavirus disease,” is there a suggestion that the government bought these supplies.

### ***Topic 3: Stories About How Individual Countries Responded to the Virus (Excluding South Africa When It Comes to the Sowetan and Nigeria When It Comes to the Daily Trust)***

The final category of stories to be considered is those that reported how individual countries responded to the respective disease outbreaks. These stories made up the bulk of the coverage for reports filed about Ebola and the Coronavirus. Some of the developments highlighted under this topic include coverage of social unrest, such as protests as a result of the disease outbreak:

PROTESTS IN EBOLA-HIT LIBERIA—*Sowetan*, 5 August 2014;  
S/LEAONE LAW MAKES HIDING EBOLA PATIENTS ILLEGAL—*Daily Trust*, 25 August 2014;  
ITALY TO EXTEND ITS NATIONAL LOCKDOWN—*Sowetan*, 30 March 2020;  
COVID-19: COURTS START TRIAL BY VIDEO—*Daily Trust*, 10 April 2020.

There were many similarities in the coverage of domestic developments in Western and African countries, with the reports focusing on lockdown-related measures such as the implementation of lockdowns, laws that mandated mask-wearing and the evacuations of citizens. These reports employed very similar discourses, which confirmed that in these respects, the response globally had followed a similar approach in response to the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak. Where differences were observed was in the fact that considerably more attention was given to the social unrest that ensued in African countries. Some of the headlines about this were:

TUNISIA ORDERS ARMY INTO STREETS TO ENFORCE LOCKDOWN—*Daily Trust*, 24 March 2020;  
BOY SHOT DEAD AS VIRUS CURFEW ENFORCED—*Daily Trust*, 1 April 2020;  
VIRUS QUARANTINE SPARKS VIOLENCE—*Sowetan*, 22 August 2020.

There were no reports about the social discord that occurred in America and Europe due to citizens not complying with the mandate measures, even though one is aware that there were public demonstrations in this regard. Not writing about these clashes in Western countries created the impression to readers that this social discord was unique to Africa.

For political developments, what one observed was that there was a greater likelihood to highlight individual politicians if they were American or European and a tendency to write generally about political developments in Africa. Examples of the headlines of stories about individual European and American politicians included:

PM ORBAN GETS SWEEPING POWERS TO TACKLE CORONAVIRUS—*Daily Trust*, 31 March 2020;

TRUMP TO DEPLOY NATIONAL GUARD TO FIGHT VIRUS—*Daily Trust*, 24 March 2020; TRUDEAU WANTS TO RECALL MPS TO BACK MASSIVE CORONAVIRUS AID—*Daily Trust*, March 2020;

HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE: GOVT AGREES TO RELEASE DRUG AFTER TRUMP THREAT—*Daily Trust*, 8 April 2020.

In discourse analysis, who is named and who is anonymised is an important indicator of where power and privilege lie (Foucault 2019). As Rajagopalan (2003, p. 82) argues, “using names and surnames in politics is the first step toward media swaying public opinion either for or against reported personalities and events.” In this case, naming these Western leaders gave them a greater sense of agency than African leaders who were not named. Their actions were attributed to them as individuals, whereas African leaders’ actions were attributed to their governments. They thus came across as more powerful, positively emphasising their ability to lead. The literature on discourse and naming further argues that this act of naming and anonymising served a semantic function. Guimarães (2003, p. 54) states: “To name something . . . is to give it historical existence. It is not by chance how quickly the date of September 11, 2001 moved into the category of an event name.”

Similarly, in the wake of the Coronavirus, the names Trump and Trudeau came to mean something, and they represented Western nations’ responses to the pandemic. African leaders, however, were not named. This choice emphasised the power that individual Western leaders wielded while de-emphasising the power of African leaders.

Based on the analysis of these three topics, Table 2 visually categorises the coverage using van Dijk’s ideological square framework. It shows that in their reports on European countries and the United States of America, the discourse’s macro- and microstructures emphasised these nations’ positive features and de-emphasised the negative ones. Conversely, concerning African countries, there was a tendency to de-emphasise the positive while emphasising negative aspects. They perpetuated the “us vs them” ideology that van Dijk’s framework lays out by engaging in the same type of “othering” discourse used by Western newspapers when reporting disease outbreaks in Africa (Washer 2004). The fact that this type of discourse was used across two different outbreaks and by newspapers from two

**Table 2** Fames in Western media

Emphasising positive (“us”)	De-emphasising positive (“them”)
Western countries were associated with providing aid Western countries were portrayed as having a cure Reporting that focused on Western countries coming out of lockdown Emphasising the agency of individual Western leaders	Reports on ceasefires being declared and observed by warring groups in reverence of a WHO request Focus on the number of people being evacuated from African countries even though the number of infections was less than Western countries in the case of Ebola Repeated warnings for Africa to brace itself for worse to come, even though it managed much better than its Western counterparts There was not much focus on easing and opening African economies, even though there was quite a lot of coverage on economies closing A death rate of around 90% was often referenced concerning the 2014 Ebola outbreak, even though in that particular rate, the rate was around 60%
De-emphasising negative (“us”)	Emphasising negative (“us”)
Westerners who died of Ebola were reported on in glowing terms Death in Western countries were reported on in abstract terms using mainly figures America defunded WHO Minimal reference to the deadly nature of Coronavirus and no reference to the way it killed people Very little focus on the impact of the pandemic on Western countries	Africans were portrayed as begging for aid Africans were portrayed as begging for medication Reports focused on protests and hospitals being destroyed Graphic accounts of Ebola and repeated reference to it as a deadly disease in the context of it having been prevalent in African countries More stories on individuals who died from the virus from African countries More stories on the impact of the pandemic on the economies of African countries

different African countries suggests that this perspective was not an isolated phenomenon. However, considering two newspapers only means that one cannot generalise this as a trend across African publications and points to future study areas where a more extensive comparative study can consider differences and similarities.

The prevalence of news reports from wire services such as Reuters and AFP was probably a significant contributor to the use of discourse that advanced the “us vs them” ideology. The reports might have been featured in African newspapers, and as this study revealed, might even have centred developments in Africa by the sheer number of reports on African countries. However, the discourse’s macro- and microstructures show that the writers still espoused a worldview of Africa as the “dark continent.” What was striking is that in the early stages of the global Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, African countries were doing a much better job of dealing with the outbreak, based on the infection and fatality rates, and the decisiveness with which governments acted when striving to mitigate the spread and economic ramifications of the virus. However, this narrative did not come through in these reports.

Instead, they focused on what was yet to come, based on predictions rooted in a view of African countries as impoverished and needy. This points to a need for African newspapers to find new ways of sourcing news reports on developments on the continent, rather than relying primarily on Western news wire services if they are to challenge the discourse that portrays the continent as one prone to death, disaster, disease and despair.

Secondly, it could be that deeply engrained in journalistic discourse is a perspective that normalises disparaging news reports on Africa. One such practice is the inclination to name Western leaders while anonymising African leaders. As discussed, newspapers gave American and European leaders agency while portraying African leaders as responders. Similarly, American and European victims of these diseases were reported using affirming and empowering discourse, while African victims were anonymised.

## Conclusion

These findings suggest that it is not enough for African newspapers to emphasise reporting on the continent by ensuring breadth of coverage. Considering the number of relevant news reports, these publications appeared to prioritise developments on the African continent over those happening on the continents of Europe, America and Australia (Fig. 1). However, upon examining the number of reports on developments within individual African countries compared to developments in individual Western countries, Western countries appeared to get disproportionate coverage (Fig. 2). This supports a view that issues that affect Western countries tend to receive more in-depth news reporting, while reports on African countries are scant and often lack context (Chouliaraki 2008). This, in turn, suggest that even when allowed to address the paucity in coverage on African issues, African newspapers are inclined to prioritise stories on developments in Western countries. Linked to this, many of these reports had by-lines that suggested that they are from Western news wire services and did not necessarily originate from journalists based in Africa (Fig. 3). According to Strentz (1992), this would explain why the discourse “others” African countries, because the people who define news stories play a critical role in shaping and framing the information reported, and in this case, they were Westerners who still viewed Africa as the “dark continent” (Jarosz 1992).

When it comes to the findings related to the discourse used in these news reports, what emerges is that both the macro- and microstructures of the language perpetuate the “us vs them” ideology, where the discourses used in these publications exhibits negative self-representation of the African continent and positive other-representation of Western countries, in the same way as Western newspapers. Examples of positive other-representation of Western countries during the Coronavirus pandemic included reports that emphasised the agency of individual Western leaders and stories that focused on Western countries that were coming out of lockdown due to reduced infection and death rates. This kind of reporting was not



employed when reporting on African countries. During the Ebola pandemic, the stories often employed favourable terms when reporting on Westerners who died of the disease and negative ones, including “Liberian Ebola imposter” when referencing affected Africans. The fact that African countries kept deaths and infections during the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak to a minimum was de-emphasised. Instead, the emphasis was on the donations Western countries were making to African countries. Concerning the economic implications of the Coronavirus outbreak, the reports appear to have emphasised pessimistic forecasts on how African countries would be hard hit and very little was said about Western countries which suffered, comparably, more significant losses due to their numbers of the infected. The reports seem to have adopted a view that because Africa has been typically associated with poverty and lack, such a status quo will persist (World Bank 2020). Finally, when it comes to domestic developments in different countries, the emphasis was on what was going right in Western countries and what was going wrong in African countries. An example was that there were no news reports on the public outcry against government lockdown in Western nations, while there were several such reports about African countries.

This empirical study used van Dijk’s ideological square framework to undertake a discourse analysis on how two African newspapers reported on the outbreak of two pandemics. The study aimed to analyse how these publications engaged in self-representation of African countries and other-representation of Western countries. As with other research on news stories about health matters, the study confirms that these reports are ideologically laden (Dudo et al. 2007; Luisi et al. 2018; Davis and Davina 2020). Follow-up studies need to be undertaken to discuss why these reports perpetuated the “us vs them” ideology that Western newspapers employed when reporting disease in Africa. Further studies should also be undertaken to analyse whether this phenomenon occurred only in Africa or found applicability in other developing contexts.

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