# Ideological Positioning in Covid-19 News Reportage in Ghana

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## Abstract

This study investigates the different ideological positions in news reportage on COVID-19 between April to August, 2020, reported on Citi TV, Joy News and TV3. The research examines lexical choices in the news that enact ideological positions following the assumptions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the main instrument of analysis for the news reports. It became evident from the analysis that the ideological positioning in the three TV stations are represented differently. Whereas Citi TV tends to use lexical choices to minimize the seriousness of the pandemic, Joy News uses lexical choices to hold the government and stakeholders accountable to affected patients. Lexical choices used by TV3, on the other hand, employs words to appeal to Ghanaians to adhere to safety protocols by providing facts from credible sources. The news reports on COVID-19 demonstrates how the three TV stations reported on the same pandemic in vastly different ways through particular uses of lexicon that reflected their differing ideological positions and national interests.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Ghanaian TV stations, ideological positioning, language, media.

## Introduction

Jones, Chick & Hafner (2015) have observed that discourse in the media currently, hovers around the rapid landscape of digital media changing the face of the traditional media practices. Besides, TV news broadcast has over the years seen a gradual change, especially, the content of news (Jurkowitz, Hitlin, Mitchell, Santhanam, Adams, Anderson & Vogt, 2013). The media have widely been seen as a tool, although the liberalists belief that it is a neutral entity with free content for public consumption (Cakmak, 2018). The Marxists (who see ideology as false consciousness), however, insist that the media is the transmitter of ideologies produced entirely under the power of the government (Cakmak, 2018, p. 817) to control the masses. According to Pan (2015), a number of studies of media discourse employing Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) as an approach have demonstrated that distinct ideological positioning can be discerned in reports on the same event in different news outlets (see Trew 1979; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1992, 1995a, 1995b; van Dijk 1995; Fang 2001). This is also true for news reportage on COVID-19, in which being ideologically neutral is advocated and expected, though not followed in practice.

Long tradition of state ownership of the Ghanaian media resulted in control and severe tension among media practitioners prior to the 1992 constitution (which opened media airwaves for privatization). Gadzekpo (2007) notes, "the history of the press in Ghana has been chequered and marred by decades of political and economic instability" (Gadzekpo, 2007; p.89). Prior to the 1992 constitution, both the print and electronic media houses were under the full control of the colonial and post-colonial authorities. Newspapers that were published within this period could not survive the test of time, mainly due to inadequate funds and lack of publication materials (Anyidoho, 2016; Davor, 2015). The 1992 constitution

gave media practitioners in Ghana a sense of relieve and brought an end to state control and monopoly with its attendant "Culture of Silence" (Davor, 2015, p. 3). This opened up the media in Ghana from the print to electronic and currently online.

**Statement of the Problem**

Ideology plays a critical role in shaping or framing language (Ghaderinezhad, 2015) especially, language of the news. The French philosopher, Antoine Destutt de Tracy, who introduced the concept – ideology, used the term as a short name for what he called the "science of ideas." He explained it as "the science of ideas that aims to establish the source of our beliefs, perceptions, and opinions so that we could overcome some of our prejudices and illusions that cause mutual misunderstandings and conflicts between people" (Lisovyi, 1997 cited in Lylo, 2016, p. 13). In linguistic anthropology, ideology, when explored, exposes how a speaker's linguistic beliefs are linked to social systems, which the speaker belongs, illustrating how such systems reinforce those beliefs. Ideology is arguably an important yet controversial linguistic concept "present in any utterance" (Fowler & Marshall, 1985, p. 21). Some scholars propose that ideology should be associated with "ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interest of a ruling group or class by distortion or dissimulation" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 30, as cited in Calzada Perez, 2003, p. 4). These scholars also think that ideology is a set of "attitudes shared by members of a particular social group" (Bloor and Bloor 2007, p. 10). They think that ideology play important role in "speech and cultural practices that operate to the advantage of a particular social group" (Mesthrie, 2010, p. 320).

Van Dijk, a corner stone of speech and writing, raises concerns about the traditional descriptions and approaches to ideology. According to Dijk (2006), the traditional concepts of ideology as belief systems do not include the social practices or ' societal structures ' that are based on them and this implies that the theory of ideology needs to have a 'cognitive component' that deals properly with it as being belief systems (p. 2). He reiterates that there are no private personal ideologies and that these belief systems are shared by the members of a social group. Thus, an individual may not have a private ideology for himself, but he may be involved within certain guidelines or thoughts that determine his ideology (Ghaderinezhad, 2015). Other scholars believe that every utterance is ideologically marked and the concern of linguists should be to expose these hidden ideologies for the purpose of meaning making (Fowler and Marshall, 1985). Fowler (1991, p. 10) asserts, "anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position." These views expressed by Fowler and Marshall (1985) and Fowler (1991) are directly related to the field of ideology and language. When beliefs and ideas are transmitted from one culture to another cultural environment, where beliefs and ideas are different, there are changes effected to the beliefs and ideas to suit the new cultural environment. The COVID-19 pandemic, though originated from Wuhan – China, and later spread to other parts of the world, each culture handled and reported the pandemic differently in the media.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has widely been applied to the study of ideological manipulation in monolingual discourse (e.g., van Dijk 1988a, 1988b; Wodak 1989; Fairclough 1995a, 1995b; Wodak and Meyer 2001) or in bilingual comparison (e.g., Puurtinen 2000). However, few CDA-oriented studies have explored ideological conflict in journalistic reportage on sensitive global pandemic issues such as the COVID-19, which makes this research relevant, especially in the times we live in now. If this research is not conducted, we will miss the important role language and ideology has played in the COVID-19 pandemic news reportage in Ghanaian media. Thus, this study is an attempt to answer the

question: What are the ideological representations in Ghana's COVID-19 news reportage? If there are, this study will want to find them out and investigate their relevance.

**Ideology in the literature**

The liberalists explain media as a neutral entity with free content for public consumption (Cakmak, 2018). The Marxists, however, believe that the media is the transmitter of ideologies produced entirely under the power of the government (Cakmak, 2018, p. 817) to control the masses with their ideologies or belief systems. Under this system, the Marxists argue that ideologies held by the masses are false consciousness; because, what the people hold as their worldview, serve the interest of the ruling class. In the literature, whereas some researchers regard the media as a major tool for transferring the ideologies of the dominant group (Cakmak, 2018; Lu & Chu, 2016); others insist that ideology is an apparatus in the media that binds the society to sovereign power (McQuail, 2010; Yilmaz & Kirazolugu, 2014). Media, in this study, will represent a sophisticated platform through which news presenters convey information and their ideological positions to viewers. The meanings associated with ideology and media in the literature, suggest that the media is the main mode of transferring ideologies to the society. By this, the media contents released on daily basis, ideologically, influence the people. The content of news have what it takes to transfer or disseminate the ideologies or systems of beliefs, ideas and values to the people (McQuail, 2010) or audience, or in this case, viewers.

Regarding whose ideologies news presenters transmit in their reportage to viewers, Fairclough in Toolan (2002) explains that institutions construct their ideological and discoursal subjects, in that they impose ideological and discoursal constraints on them as a condition for qualifying them to act as subjects. Subjects of news presentations on TV include news editors, reporters, news presenters and anchors, among others. White (1964) states that "the media editor, by virtue of his position as a gatekeeper, disseminate to the public only those events that he considers to be true and wholesome. **The Figures 1** and **2** below indicates the all-important role of editors as gatekeepers (White, 1964).
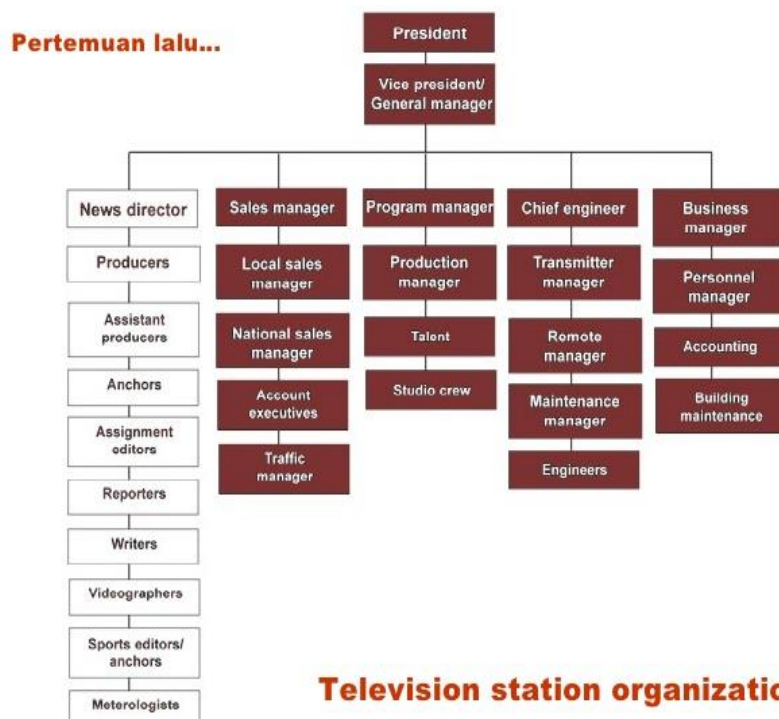


**Television station organization chart**

**Figure 1: Organization of subjects of Television Stations for news presentations (on the left side of the Figure)**



## TV Newsroom Hierarchy

**Editorial**

Editor-in-chief (News Director)

Strand Editor + Assignment Editor

Senior Broadcast Journalists + Anchors

Broadcast Journalists + Correspondents + Reporters (Local, Sport, Weather, etc.) + Interview Producers + Presenters (News Readers)

Broadcast Assistant

**Technical**

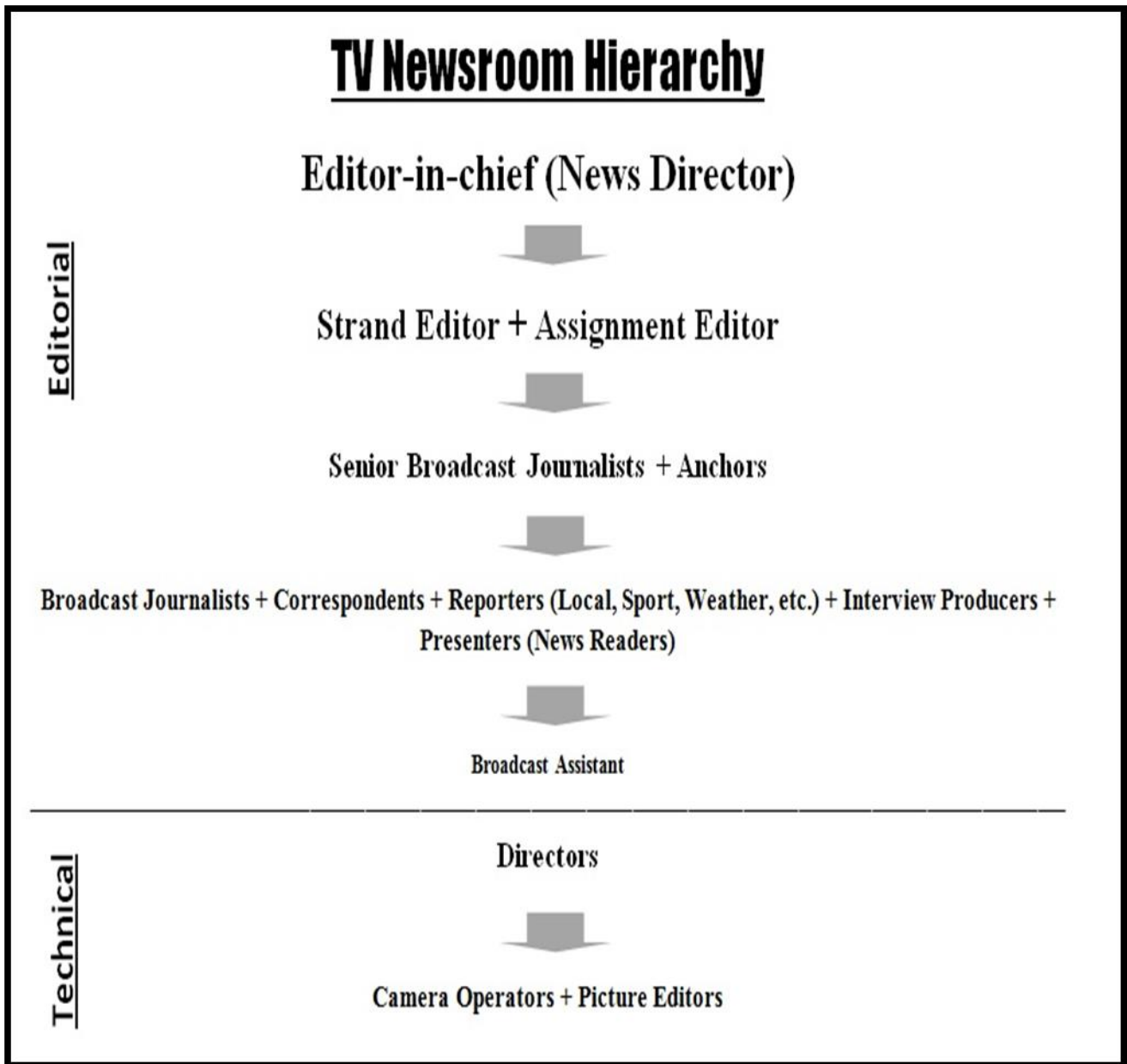Directors

Camera Operators + Picture Editors

**Figure 2: Locating subjects in Television News presentation practice in their hierarchical order**

The media editor's role in TV news presentations, as can be seen from **Figures 1** and **2**, has been described as "gate keeping" (White, 1964, p. 147). However, the role of news presenters is equally important, if not more significant. Stressing this view, Hyland and Diani (2009, p. 4) notes that speakers or news presenters convey an attitude towards those they address and the material they discuss. Moreover, they are the carriers of ideologies within contents of news (Toolan, 2002, p. 336). The extent to which this is so in Ghana's COVID-19 news reportage is part of what I investigate in this study.

**Theoretical Background**

**Critical discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has gained popularity in research due to "its interdisciplinary nature" (Asensio, 2016). Bloor and Bloor (2007) explain that it is a recent approach to discourse analysis and it emerges from the combination of ideas of several backgrounds. One cannot successfully define CDA without drawing from Van Dijk (2008), one of the forerunners of CDA, who suggests that CDA is "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." Van Dijk emphasizes that there is the need to relate discourse to broader social issues and unravel the ways power is exercised through it (Asensio, 2016). According to Ghaderinezhad (2015), the key step to uncover or reveal the ideological markers within the structures of language discourse, and how social events contribute to shaping ideologies within the discourse, is Critical Discourse Analysis (p. 884). Ghaderinezhad (2015) further explains that in several research studies, CDA has been utilized to prove the impact of the ideological stamp on language. For Fowler (1991) in Toolan (2002, p. 346) CDA is "an analysis of public discourse designed to get at the ideology coded implicitly behind the overt propositions, to examine it in the context of social formations." In Fowler's view, "in the present political and social climate, occasions for ideological critique are pressed upon our lives daily" (Toolan, 2002, p. 353). It is against this background that this study investigates the ideological stamp and code on the language used in reporting COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, as a critical linguist, in this study, I expose the ideological level of meaning in news reportage that has the capacity of manipulating viewers by examining the lexical choices that have ideological underpinnings in Ghana's COVID-19 news presentations.

In the search for ideological underpinnings of discourse, a core group of linguistic features ought to be examined (Hakam, 2009, p. 37). The linguistic feature most relevant to this study in establishing the ideological positioning in news reportage on COVID-19 in Ghana is lexical choice:

**Lexical choice**

lexicalization or word choice, in van Dijk's (1995) view is the major dimension of (ideologically controlled) discourse meaning'(Johnson et al., 2010, p. 248). Choice of words in news reports believed systematically are determined by societies not arbitrary, nor it is journalist's own creation (Pan, 2002, pp. 51-52). Richardson (2007) advances this point by suggesting that all types of words, but particularly **nouns**, **adjectives**, **verbs** and **adverbs** carry connoted in addition to denoted meanings (p. 47). Thus, analysis of particular words used in news reportage (such as COVID-19 news reports) is usually the first stage of any text or discourse analysis towards ideological positioning as is done in this study (Richardson, 2007, p. 47).

**Methodology**

The data for this study is based on the coverage of COVID-19 news from three (3) influential TV stations in Ghana. The selected TV stations are Citi TV (CTV), Joy News (JTV) and TV3 Ghana (TTV). The aggregate data included COVID-19 news reports dating from March through 18 August 2020, when the contagious Wuhan Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic hit the world and the trend of news reportage, and lockdown became compulsory in almost all parts of the world. The selection of TV stations was limited by certain parameters. Firstly, they are among the most influential, well- established and highly watched TV stations which are viewed not only nationally but internationally. Finally, they are available

online (where I downloaded news reports on COVID-19 for this research), providing the world with easy access to the latest news and information.

Recurrent stereotypical reportage of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to averagely low level of seriousness attached to the pandemic are due to various types of linguistic choices and how news on the pandemic is reported. To establish the accuracy or otherwise of this assumption, news reportage on COVID-19 were downloaded, transcribed (using Jefferson's model of transcription) and carefully examined in terms of a major linguistic feature (lexical choice). The choice of COVID-19 news report for a close examination of ideological construction is motivated by the current social, political and economic standstill that this pandemic has brought to the world and Ghana, and the role news reportage on it has played in the process. Finally, the present study focused on verbal features of the news reports, consequently, non-verbal properties (images, footages, facial expressions and sounds that accompany news) were not considered in the analysis. Analysis was conducted following assumptions of CDA.

**Analysis and Discussions**

In Ghana's COVID-19 news reportage, it was observed that each TV station's report exhibited different ideology through their lexical choices. Thus, as Fowler (1991) suggested, the content of reports on the pandemic from the stations contain specific and peculiar beliefs, values, propositions, and ideology. Linguistic choices that are made in texts, according to Fairclough (1995), can carry ideological meanings. Similarly, Van Dijk (1995 and 1998) explains lexical choices as one of the important linguistic tools that contain ideologies in texts and talk. In news reportage on COVID-19, Citi TV employed words that give the impression that the corona virus, to them, was not as serious as was imagined. Instances of the use of different lexical choices for different ideological positionings are presented below (lexical choices that support this observation are highlighted):

**Example 1**
Welcome to another coverage (.) special coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic… let's start globally then we will trickle down to Ghana (.) **Beautiful picture** of what is happening (.) **Don't give us many sad stories (laughter)**

(Citi TV, 8 May 2020)

**Example 2**
Now in your mind patients will be lying in hospital beds perhaps coughing because we heard of what symptoms people with COVID-19 exhibit (.) That is **not the case here** (.) These are people who are **moving freely** (.) The two young men **playing** cards on the table (.)

(Citi TV, June 2020)

In Example 1, interconnected lexical words such as "**beautiful picture**", "**don't give…sad stories**" were employed in the news on COVID-19. By using these lexical terms, subjects of the news from Citi TV seems to associate this deadly pandemic, which has claimed the lives of millions all over the world including Ghana, to a "**picture**" that is "**beautiful.**" The word "**beautiful**" represents something possessing pleasing qualities with high standard. "**Picture**" is an image of something or someone. Thus, Citi TV's reportage on the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the seriousness of this virus to a pleasant image. Viewers of this news report will treat the situation with the same level of apathy. Similarly, in their report on June 2020 in Example 2, terms such as "**not the case here**", "**moving freely**" and "**playing**" were used. In this report, the reporter had visited treatment center and was reporting to Ghanaians what

was happening in the isolation center. According to the report, instead of the serious conditions viewers expected the COVID-19 patients to be in, the case there was different. Instead, even those who had contracted the virus, and were in isolation are "**moving freely**" and "**playing cards**." This news report suggest that if as a viewer, you are still indoors (as everyone was asked to do for a while) you can start moving freely and playing as you used to since those in quarantine are doing so. Lexical choices such as **beautiful picture**, **moving freely**, **playing**, among others, from Citi TV convey a particular ideological meaning to the discourse (Van Dijk, 1998) of the COVID-19 pandemic. The next news reports are from Joy News.

Example 3
It's been barely four months since the novel corona virus was first reported in Wuhan China… No doubt the development is having a **huge impact** on every aspect of **Ghana's economy** especially the **hospitality sector (.)…**The **damage** that COVID-19 will have on the hospitality industry is **immeasurable** (.)

(Joy News, April 2020)

Example 4
… the **pharmaceutical industry** says they are set (.) they are ready for any **eventualities** that comes (.) to ehh the prevention side…When people have to use **ventilators↓** that's where **the country** is really **falling short** hhh (.) So **we better move the conversation**… to the **real deal↑** How do we take care of **sick people** when they get **critical**

(Joy News, May 2020)

In news report on the pandemic from Joy News, lexical choices in their news content suggest that they are interested in the damage caused by COVID-19 to Ghana's economy and the response (positive or negative) government and other stakeholders are giving towards the fight against the pandemic in Ghana. In their reportage on the corona virus, terms such as "**huge impact**", "**Ghana's economy**", "**damage**", and "**immeasurable**" were resorted to in Example 3, suggesting how important and serious the pandemic is. Such words indicate absolute serious situation that must be attended to immediately. In their subsequent news report on the pandemic, words such as "**pharmaceutical industry**", "**eventualities**", "**ventilators**", "**falling short**", "**real deal**" and "**critical**" were used. Joy News' choice of words and terms in their reportage on the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Ghana conveys an ideological meaning (Fairclough, 1995) to viewers, which is that of accountability from both government and relevant stakeholders to Ghanaians who contract the deadly virus. Registers, which are suitable for the pandemic, are used in their news content, giving their viewers enough reasons to join in the fight against the pandemic. Compared to Citi TV news reportage on this same pandemic, Joy News present a more serious content of news on the pandemic, which positions their viewers to take the COVID-19 seriously and hold all stakeholders including government accountable. The next news contents come from TV3 Ghana.

Instead of using the words "**beautiful picture"**, "**playing**", "**moving freely**" (as was done in Citi TV news report), or "**damage**", "**huge impact**", "**ventilators**", "**critical**" (as was used in Joy News report), TV3 prefered to use to use words such as "**figures**" "**number of confirmed cases**", and "**hotspot**" as can be seen in their news reports below:

Example 6

↑Well there's been an **increase** in Ghana's COVID-19 **case count** (.)…**unfortunately** (.) we've had **four people succumb to COVID-19 in the country** (.) **increasing the number of death cases** from 66 to 70 eh very **worrying eh development** there…

<div align="center">(TV3, 19 June 2020)</div>

Example 6

…Creating a lot of **concern** and **worry** as to what exactly is happening with a lot more **people** reporting to eh **health facilities SICK** (.) ↑This is the **recovery rate** as well…(.) ↓In fact we all **have a role to play** (.) ↑**ADHERE** to the **safety protocols** (0.1**) Let's all stay safe** (.)

<div align="center">(TV3, June 2020)</div>

TV3's lexical choices such as "**increase** in Ghana's COVID-19 **case count**", "**increasing** the number of **dead cases**", "**worrying** d**evelopment**" in NR (5) shows that they are interested in the cases and adverse effects of the pandemic. Their choices of words indicate their affection for the welfare of their viewers in this pandemic season by providing adequate confirmed figures of the cases (of death, recoveries, positive) to lure their viewers to see the reasons why they must not joke with the COVID-19 pandemic. By their use of lexical expressions like "**↓In fact we all have a role to play**", "**↑ADHERE to the safety protocols**" and "**Let's all stay safe** (.)", TV3's news content appeal to the moral judgements and values of viewers to obey safety protocols in this season. Reporters were elaborating the statistical implications of the cases confirmed. The lexical choices demonstrate the way they expect viewers to see the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

The ideology of Citi TV in this study is that the pandemic is not as serious or threatening as we imagined. This ideology is shaped by their choices of words that suggested that we could look at the brighter or beautiful picture of the deadly COVID-19. Because of this view, Citi TV seemed to hide the bad side of the COVID-19 through their choices of words.

The tone of news report in Joy News towards the COVID-19 pandemic was present in their lexical choices. They stand for accountability and serious approach to handling the pandemic by the government of Ghana and relevant stakeholders. Their objective is to address the most relevant matters to handle victims who contract the virus. Due to this ideology, Joy News uses strong and uncompromising words to put the government of Ghana and stakeholders on their toes. T

he main ideology of TV3 in this research is that when viewers are given accurate figures and statistics pertaining to cases recorded in Ghana, it will be a good bases to appeal to Ghanaians to protect themselves. This ideology is the reason why in their reportage on COVID-19, they pay attention to the increasing number of COVID-19 patients, cases of recoveries and death. As a result, TV3 ignore the government and concentrate on giving facts and figures from reliable sources to get their viewers serious with the pandemic.

## Implications of the study

This research has two-fold implications: for journalists and viewers. Concerning the former, journalists will realize that news language is not neutral. The news they are reporting will unconsciously convey their ideological positions and values they have towards the issue they are reporting. Hence, subjects of news should be aware of the lexical choices in their reportage.

Regarding viewers, this study will help them to have more understanding on news language that does not have neutral approach. Thus, when they watch news report, they will not jump into conclusions after listening to news report from just one source. I recommend that news reports on sensitive matters, such as COVID-19, should be heard from different sources or TV stations to get a clearer picture.

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