

Textual Aesthetics and Ethical Issues in Select News Headlines on Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The article examines textual aesthetics and ethical issues in select news headlines on Corona virus (Covid-19) pandemic and analyses the extent to which such headlines communicate aesthetically and/or ethically. The news headlines were drawn from online versions of news media which were regularly reporting the pandemic especially in its peak period in mid-2020. Guided by the already discussed relevant aesthetic and ethical indices, the article finds out that many of the Corona virus news headlines analysed have raised some aesthetic and ethical concerns. These textual aesthetic and ethical concerns are mainly in the areas of syntax, semantics, decency, and peace. The article recommends, among other things, more aesthetic and ethical carefulness on the part of editors when selecting words for news headlines that border on disease spread and control.

Key Words: *Textual Aesthetics, Media digitization, Semantic Aesthetics, Syntactic Aesthetics, Citizen Journalism, Ethics and Self-Censorship*

Introduction

The world is currently experiencing what may be described as democratization of journalism practice. While more persons now have access to the media, others are now media owners, particularly the New Media platforms. Of course, media democratization has made it possible for many mass media organs to have their online versions, thus, making it possible for people and researchers discuss or analyse media contents with relative ease. According to Okon (2015), this development has not only broken many describe as structural and administrative impediments to seamless media (especially broadcast media) operations in the country, it has also posed serious challenges to those who, before now, saw news vending as strictly the profession of people who studied journalism, communication arts or mass communication. Also, it may no longer be the case of him who pays the piper calls the tune. Rather, it is, with the coming of citizen journalism, becoming a celebration of professional competition. What this means, too, to Okon (2015), is that the democratization of journalism practice, has allowed for wider participation in media content generation, manipulation and dissemination, as news headlines now appear mainly through online platforms. However, this article, which discusses the relevance of aesthetics and ethics in headline writing, particularly takes a look at the application of certain aesthetic and ethical principles in the writing of news headlines that have to do with Corona virus, a pandemic that knows no social status or

boundaries. This is predicated on the worrisome suspicion that not many headlines written on the dreaded Corona virus are aesthetically and ethically good enough for public consumption.

Textual Aesthetics and Ethical Considerations in News Headline Writing

Zettl (2014) holds that an object of communication is said to be aesthetic if such an object gives pleasure and enjoyment to the onlooker or audience. Aesthetics is the attractiveness of the media content or the pleasure it gives to the audience through meaningful appeal to the appropriate sense organ (Senam, 2012). Aesthetics is a product of creativity. Since artists use their creative sensibility to produce pleasure and enjoyment in the minds of their audience, it follows that an artist facilitates or is the source of an aesthetic experience. What this means, in relation to news headline writing, is that for a newspaper headline writer to bring aesthetics to bear in his work, he has to write his headline as an artist. In other words, and according to Udoh (2017a), he has to script the headline in a form and structure that will attract serious attention of an informed reader, listener and viewer. In order to achieve this, the headline writer, like any other artist, has to follow certain processes. He must follow certain indices that will make his headline achieve some aesthetic goals.

However, to many journalism practitioners, especially those with broadcast journalism mindset, who are exposed to Zettl (2014), aesthetics is better appreciated when viewed from television or film production angle. To such people, media aesthetics revolves round Zettl's popular television production elements or aesthetic fields, which, basically are: lighting, sound and colour qualities available to a television or film producer. This makes broadcast scholars and students less interested in other mass media areas that could be covered under aesthetic studies. But aesthetic studies cannot be limited to broadcast production elements. Therefore, according to Udoh (2017a), apart from Zettl's broadcast aesthetic inclination, another fruitful way of studying communication and media aesthetics generally and news headline aesthetics, specifically, is that of seeing it from print media perspective and to him, the print media could be in hard or soft copy. That is why, to him, aesthetic studies have kept expanding in scope, transcending the traditional broadcast media where it first started. That is why in Nigerian media studies, one now hears of textual aesthetics (Udoh and Obot, (2013); Udoh, (2017a); Udoh, (2017b); Udoh, Akpan and Peters (2017); photo aesthetics (Udoakah and Udoh, 2016); and sports aesthetics (Udoh, Akpabio, and Akpan, 2017) and such other contributions towards the continued expansion of the coast of the subject matter. Also, in Nigeria, as it may be the case in other countries, there are specific works on print media aesthetics, which, again, could have a relationship with this article. Such print media and print media related works are: Senam (2009), Udoh (2020), Anim (2003), Udoh (2012); Udoh (2014), Udoh (2015), Udoh (2017, Udoh, Akpabio, and Akpan (2017), Udoh, Akpan and Peters (2017); Udoh and Obot (2013), Udoh, Udoakah (1996); Udoakah and Oliseh (2009); Udoakah and Udoh (2016); Batta (2008); and Anim (2003). These works prove Johnson's (2004) insistence on the adaptability of the concept and practice of aesthetics beyond Zettl's broadcast orientation. Therefore, it is not out of place to take a look at the application of aesthetics in news headline writing, concerning any media of communication that recognises headline writing. This will help in identifying those aesthetic elements that could make news headline writing more pleasurable to the reader, listener or viewer.

Specifically, however, Udoh and Obot (2013) see textual aesthetics as the art of using or combining words in such a way the reader finds pleasure and satisfaction in what he reads. What they mean here is that just as a film producer considers what to do during a particular production to hold attention of viewers; a news copy writer may not hold his reader's interest if he does not consider appropriate phraseology – grammar, semantics, mechanics and punctuations – when writing headlines, news, features and such other professionally packaged copies in a language. What this means, too, is that just as a film or television

producer considers appropriate lighting, colour, sound and movement for his production, a textual communicator needs to consider the correctness and appropriateness of words used in constructing a sentence or headline. This is because a reader, according to them, finds more pleasure when he learns what is not only correct but adds to his pleasure and enjoyment. This is what Pleasure Theory of aesthetics emphasises. Udoh and Obot (2013) specifically list clarity, correctness, concreteness, candidness, and completeness as some of the aesthetic requirements in textual communication.

Besides aesthetics, ethics has some association with headline writing too. According to Daramola (1999), there is a thin line of demarcation between aesthetics and ethics. For Daramola (1999, p. 198), “ethics is the study of human actions in respect to being right or wrong or the study of human conduct in the light of moral principle”. For him, moral principles may be viewed either as the standard of conduct that the individual has constructed for himself or as the body of obligations and duties that a particular society requires of its members. He maintains that ethics grew up as man began to reflect on the intentions and consequences of his actions; and the study developed when men began to study the motives behind their actions and their results. In other words, ethics is a branch of knowledge which is concerned with the standard of good or bad conduct in the society, using societal norms as the basis for the evaluation of human conduct or behaviour (Senam, 2020). Ethics applies to all the professions and every sphere of life in the society. In relation to professional disciplines, it could be said that every profession has its own ethics. The class of ethics that governs mass media practice is called media ethics. It is the code of conduct which sets standards of behavior for media workers and also regulates their actions. Accordingly, Daramola (1999) summarises certain Ethical Code of general journalism practice in Nigeria. These are: editorial independence, accuracy and fairness, privacy, privilege and non-disclosure, decency, discrimination, reward and gratification, and violence. Other ethical concerns in journalism, according to him, are: children and minors, access to information, national interest, social responsibility, plagiarism, and copyright. From this, it is known that while aesthetics is mainly concerned with making the appreciation of a work of art an enjoyable and satisfactory experience; ethics is concerned with the moral rightness or wrongness aspect of what is put out for public consumption. In relation to headline writing, ethics is concerned with the moral or immoral trappings of the wordings of the headline.

Having gone this far in aesthetics, ethics and headline writing, it is pertinent to say that just as there are certain generally agreed rules of news writing, there are certain rules or principles generated by editors and scholars, which, if followed by headline writers, make for better headline writing. Even though there may be variations to these rules, readings show that there are certain elements of commonness among the rules of headline writing. Of interest to this discourse is the view expressed by Animmasaun (1992). According to him, news headlines should be drawn information near the top of the news story; built around key words in the lead... should include a subject and predicate and should maintain neutrality; remember the rules of grammar and observe them; eliminate articles and most adjectives and adverbs. The writer, according to him, should try to capture the flavour of the story; be easy to read; abbreviate sparingly; use short, simple words, but avoid such overworked and misused words; be definite, telling specifically what happened; and should never exaggerate. Headline writers, according to him, should not use common last names that are not easily recognized and should not use slang (p. 22). Similarly, Udoh (2015, p. 65) opines that a “news headline should carry direct information; express a complete thought; be primarily written in a subject-predicate sentence pattern; be clear, simple and correct; tell what someone or something is doing; what is happening to whom, where, when, and what (show effect); contain an active verb; be built around people (written in human terms); and be bolder and larger in font than the news details”. According to him, other features are that a

headline should be well punctuated, but without a full stop at the end; each line should be meaningful on its own (in case of double or multi-deck headline); use of articles should be minimised, while modifiers and adjectives should be cautiously applied.

Before going further, it is important to take a look at Koja's (2020) opinion on ethical considerations for reporting Covid-19. According to him, a Covid-19 reporter should make four considerations while reporting the pandemic. These, according to him, are: breaking the news of death, respecting the sources' confidentiality, verifying data, and reporting racism and hate speech. According to him, when breaking news of death from complications from Covid-19, especially when it involved news makers, journalists should consider abandoning the thrill of breaking the story and take some time to check with the police or local authorities to see if the family of the deceased has been informed. To him, also, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic coverage means a lot of information comes from people who are on the frontlines. Therefore, every source should be asked if he could be named in the story. These include nurses, doctors, whistleblowers, and disgruntled staff. Again, to him, the question, can your data be verified?, should be an important question or journalists using data during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is because there is a lot of data coming from different parts and organizations of the world showing casualty figures, funding allocated for medical supplies and the impact of the virus on life generally.

Citizen Journalism, Online Journalism, New Media, and Social Media

The concept of online, citizen and/or social media journalism gives the independent news writer, editor or media owner a relative sense of control of the news production process as it encourages people, who, hitherto, were outsiders in information gathering business, to be more involved in the news making process. As corroborated by Okon (2015), online journalism raises the overall consciousness of audience members and makes them develop the nose and eye for news. This makes such audience members more active than passive, as writers now get in touch by text, e-mail and other new media platforms with comments/opinions on stories and their treatment. According to Hudson and Rowlands (2007), citizen journalism provides audience members the opportunity to share their experiences concerning events, situations and stories, which may be beyond the reach of the few professionally trained journalists in the society. It is therefore incontrovertible that citizen journalists have now become veritable sources of news. In fact, Hudson and Rowlands (2007) explain that, if there's a sudden explosion, oil refinery fire or terrorist attack, within minutes now, we expect to have user-generated content on broadcast or online output.

It is important to stress, therefore, that majority of the citizenry especially the youths appear to prefer to access news headlines and information with their portable devices such as smart phones, laptops, and tablets. Considering the emerging dimension news gathering and dissemination have taken, new media audiences want to participate in online discussions. This is because social media platforms enable people to post news headlines and stories that is relevant and is of interest to them. Of course, Okon (2015, p. 132) affirms that "social media platforms allow the voiceless to be heard and the seemingly uneducated to contribute to rational discourse because the rules for structured language appear a bit flexible". To him, one advantage social media or citizen journalism has over mainstream media is that the audience can produce or post important headlines for discussion at will even when mainstream media fail to do so because youths prefer news they can control, talk about, condemn or appreciate at their own pace.

Again, according to Okon (2015), the dynamics of the mass media of communication have also witnessed tremendous changes in the face of the emerging social media fad. To him, the fulcrum of media content, in the foregoing context, can be instantly generated and disseminated without the conventional gates that characterize the processing of conventional

media content. This, on its own, has broken the barriers of entry, in terms of content generation, and has led to what may be termed, in some circles, as democratization of content. This attribute of the social media can no doubt be viewed from both positive and negative perspectives.

Viewed from the positive perspective, this trend, according to Okon (2015) seems to give credence to the concept of the free market place of ideas and media democratization theory. It makes access to the media an easy pastime and this is in line with the principles of Freedom of Information Act of Nigeria. On the other hand, its downside rests on the ease with which content receivers are poorly served with messages that are relatively devoid of ethics, ideologies and decency. Pavlik and McIntosh (2013) see the new media phenomenon as an intersection of technology, social interaction and information sharing within varied perspectives. According to them, “one clear difference between social media and traditional (mainstream) media is the change from a broadcaster monologue model of one-to-many, to a more dialogic model of many-to-many communication” (p.240). However, Okon (2015), in relating this to the political democracy, observes that since democracy is built on the will of the people, new media can no doubt accord impetus to democracy by enhancing and reinforcing the will of the people through rational discourses.

Textual Aesthetic and Ethical Indices in News Pandemic Headline Writing

According to Johnson (2004), it is usually the nature of a subject matter that determines the aesthetic considerations of such a subject matter. That is why, to him, the aesthetic indices adopted and accepted in theatre production may not be the same thing with those required for ordinary television or newspaper production. In line with this, Udoh and Obot (2013) have listed the general aesthetic indices of any textual expression (especially in a sentence structure) that produces enjoyment in the minds of a reader. These include clarity, correctness, concreteness, cohesiveness, and concord. For instance, a news or feature sentence is aesthetic if it is clear to any reader or listener. What this means is that a reader of a news sentence will enjoy a sentence structure that is easily understood by them. Similarly, Daramola (1999) identifies certain aesthetic and ethical indices news headline and other textual writing for the media, which, in the context of this work, have been re-adjusted to a level where it could take into consideration by news headline writers. Again, according to Udoh and Obot (2013) anything that distorts the flow and understanding and enjoyment of a written expression is not only a noise, but also anti-aesthetic. This is because an exposed reader may not find enjoyment or satisfaction with the way words are combined in such an expression. In order to reduce noise in written headlines and promote understanding and pleasure, it becomes expedient to suggest the some aesthetic/ethical indices in news headline writing generally and online news headline writing, specifically. These are: syntax, semantics, brevity, punctuation, decency, and peace.

Syntax and Aesthetics

According to Udoh and Udoh (2020), aesthetics is not limited to Zettl's film production techniques alone, but covers textual presentations too. To them, just like a film or television viewer, a news headline reader, listener, or viewer may feel unaesthetic (disconnected, unhappy, and unsatisfied) if a news story or headline does not abide by the rules of joining words in a sentence (syntax). Therefore, syntax, as an adopted aesthetic index, especially in online media news headline writing, posits that for a headline to be in line with the Pleasure Theory of aesthetics, such a headline is written in such a way that it abides by the universally acceptable rules of sentence construction. Since news headlines communicate better when written as a sentence (Udoh, 2014), as it must contain the subject and predicate, it follows

that it must follow the known rules of sentence formation. It is, for instance, not excusable to violate what is widely seen as the first rule of concord that states that a verb must agree with its subject in number and person. According to (Udoh and Obot, 2013), any violation to this textual aesthetic expectation, on account of poor editing, renders a headline meaningless, unreasonable and un-aesthetic in the eye of an exposed reader or audience. In the context of this article, this means that the correctness of the grammar of a headline is a factor in the beauty of that headline posted to persons who are generally not of the same language orientation. This means, too, that since online media audience are more diverse than that of the traditional media of radio, television and newspaper, it becomes necessary for those who post online headlines on a current pandemic such as Covid-19 to follow the rules of the language with which they write their headlines.

Semantics and Aesthetics

Borrowed from Udoh, Archibong and Peters' (2020) coinage, *semo-aesthetics*, this index means that the wordings of a headline are seen to be aesthetic if they do not create any semantic confusion in the mind of the reader (Udoh, 2017). Therefore, as an aesthetic index, semantic aesthetics requires the headline writer to use symbols (words) that convey a meaning that would be easily or satisfactorily understood by the reader. For this to happen, the headline writer uses proper words – words that suggest and convey the same meaning between the encoder and the decoder at a given communication time. This does not only call for mastery of words; but also their proper semantic applications. The best way to use a word in a headline is to use such a word in its denotative sense. For instance, the word, *black*, is usually associated with what is negative; hence care must be taken while using the word, *black*, in a news headline. E.g. in a headline: *Black American demand justice over racial killings*, the word, *black*, should not be used in its negative sense (i.e. to mean lesser or second class people). Rather, it should be used in its original (bodily colour) sense (i.e. Africans or people who are dark in complexion). This is the first meaning to be imagined by readers. Besides, it may not be all readers of the headline that will understand the connotative meaning of the word, *black*. Semantic confusion would arise where the headline words do not convey the generally expected meaning. Any impediment to the meaning of a particular symbol is un-aesthetic.

Brevity and Aesthetics

This is what Udoh, Archibong and Peters (2020) call *brevo-aesthetics* - a combination of brevity and aesthetics. Since a headline captures or summarises the news, it is important that it is written in its shortest possible structure and because of the diverse nature of online media users, this brevity function becomes very important in headlines. For instance, when casting a headline for online readers, it must be remembered that such readers are either in transit or largely semi-literate; and as such may not have the time, patience and the intellectual capacity for lengthy sentences presented as headlines. So, to help the reader in finding enjoyment and satisfaction in a news headline, the editor makes the headline as brief as possible (Udoh, 2017). Brevity here does not imply straight jacket shortness of headline. It does not mean giving each news headline the same number of words. Rather, it is a situation where the editor builds the headline around key words, while discarding trivialities.

Punctuation and Aesthetics

The importance of proper and correct punctuation in a given group of words cannot be over-emphasised (Eyo, 2000). This is because, like grammar itself, correct punctuation adds rhythm to a headline brings out its real meaning. However, according to Udoh and Udoh (2020), apart from mechanical problems, a major challenge faced by news headline writers in

Nigeria is insertion of appropriate punctuation marks in such headlines. To him, many news headline writers in Nigeria seem to either overlook punctuation marks or use them inappropriately. He, however, sees good punctuation marks as having an aesthetic property. This is because a well punctuated sentence or news headline provides pleasurable reading as the reader knows when to pause, break or rest before continuing. Also, a well punctuated headline indicates when and where the reader should raise his voice or lower it. This is aesthetic because it adds to pleasure.

Decency and Ethics

As rightly observed by Daramola (1999), a journalistic item (including headlines) is decent if it is not offensive, abusive, vulgar and/or fear-inducing. This, according to him, means that a headline ought not to present lurid details of violence, sexual acts or horrid scenes. It connotes the use of words and expressions that command respect and promote high moral standing and it is important in headline writing as it could simultaneously promote pleasure and enjoyment.

Peace and Ethics

Many authors have made input on peace journalism, especially its meaning and merits. Udoh (2017) and Udoh, Udosen, and Tommy (2019) in their allusions to proponents of peace journalism hold that peace journalism appears in news dissemination when editors, who are headline writers cast headlines that improve the prospects for peace. This happens when headlines are written to create an atmosphere conducive for peace to reign in a society. Therefore, peace and ethical headlining explains a situation where the peace portrayed in a headline abides by the rules of morality. Similarly, Daramola (1999, p. 202) advises against a report or headline that “presents acts of violence, armed robbery, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such acts in the eyes of the public”.

Analysis of Aesthetic and Ethical Concerns in Select Online Media News Headlines on Covid 19 Pandemic

Below are select online news headlines on Covid-19 pandemic culled from popular online media organizations published in August 2020 in Nigeria. They are presented and analysed in relation to the aesthetic and ethical indices suggested and explained earlier:

Top Lagos health official tests positive for Covid-19 (BBC News)

According to Udoh (2015), a well-crafted news headline does not pose any semantic confusion; rather it means what it means directly. In other words, a well written news headline contains no word or expression that leaves the reader with option of guessing about what the word or expression actually means, or looking for a thesaurus for synonyms. Keeping a reader in suspense as to strategy to draw him into the story details that usually follow a headline is not even encouraging. Again, Udoh (2017) is apt on this when he says that it is even more unaesthetic to keep a reader in suspense as a technique to draw him into the story details. This, according to him, is because most news readers are always in transit, and it is not everyone who reads a headline that may want to read the story that follows the headline. It is equally his view that some headlines do not even have accompanying stories; and in this case, it becomes even more important to make such headline as textually aesthetic as possible. Therefore, it may not be enough to use simple words in writing a headline; such simple words should convey the required meaning. These prescriptions become even more relevant when it comes to health and life related headlines.

In relation to the headline quoted above, it is clear that it contains a semantic displeasure to an average news headline reader. The subject, “Top Lagos health official” is not only weak,

in meaning but it is also semantically. For instance, it is unclear, to a fleeting reader, who the top Lagos health official may be since there may be many other top health officials in Lagos. Therefore, it might be stressful and even discouraging (unaesthetic) to the reader to start thinking about what the headline writer actually means.

So, a replacement of the phrase “Top Lagos health official”, with a more concrete expression is necessary. In other words, the headline requires a semantic phraseology that will hit the nail in the head and this could be achieved either by mentioning the name of the health official or his designation. A look at a similar headline posted by another medium within the same period will explain the argument better. This is handled in the next headline here.

Lagos health commissioner tests positive to Covid-19 (The Nation)

Unlike the headline analysed above, this headline, which of course, is not aesthetically perfect, is precise about the personality that has contracted the disease. It does not leave a transit reader guessing or wondering who the personality that contracts the disease is. It is simply the “Lagos health commissioner”, who, of course, as a news name, is known to many news readers. Therefore, an educated reader of the headline is satisfied – he finds pleasure in the post even when in transit. This is where semantic aesthetics comes because the reader is not left in doubt about the subject of the news – the commissioner of health in Lagos State.

It must be pointed out that the hedonistic or pleasure theory of aesthetics says that an artistic object (in this case, text) is aesthetic if it gives pleasure, enjoyment or satisfaction to the audience.

However, the headline looks unaesthetic in terms of the use of an incorrect preposition “to” instead of “for”. For the headline to be aesthetic (rewarding, pleasurable and satisfactory to the reader), it should have read: *Lagos health commissioner tests positive for Covid-19*. Again, according to the Hedonistic theory of aesthetics, an average English Language speaker will find more pleasure and comfort if the preposition, “for”, were used in place of “to” in the cited headline. In other words, correct English is aesthetic and a violation of grammatical or prepositional syntax can be repelling.

Covid-19: Nigeria cases pass 50, 000 mark (BBC News)

This is another news headline text that is not cast aesthetically; hence, an informed reader may not find pleasure and enjoyment in reading it. A look at the verb of the sentence (pass) raises a fundamental semantic question in the mind of an average reader. This is because the expression, “pass”, according to BBC English Dictionary, denotes physical movement of persons or objects; hence, the word is open to other meanings that may confuse the reader. This is against Udoh’s (2014) view that headline verbs should convey denotative meanings. Also, while to some readers, the usage can easily be seen to mean that the 50, 000 is a pass mark; to others it looks too weak a word to be used in the context! These barriers to proper understanding of the meaning of the word send a noisy signal and a noisy textual symbol or signal is unaesthetic. Therefore, in order to make the headline more communicative and by extension, more aesthetic, a denotative verb, such as surpass or exceed, sounds better. Also, the use of the word, “Nigeria”, in its non-possessive case is unacceptable and hence, textually unaesthetic. The following headline by another news medium that reported the same issue explains more.

Nigeria’s Corona virus cases surpass 51, 000 (Premium Times)

No particular public event is usually covered by one news medium, hence, the same story and the same idea is covered and conveyed in this headline posted by *Premium Times*. However, the latter news medium has chosen a verb that creates little or no semantic

confusion or noise; hence, the headline can be said to be more aesthetic. It is necessary to point out that any average reader knows that the word, “surpass”, means that the number of corona virus cases has increased or is more than 51, 000. Similarly, “to surpass”, according to the BBC English Dictionary, means to go beyond the limit expected. Of course, any semantics-minded headline reader will understand, with pleasure, that Covid-19 cases have gone beyond the expected mark (51, 000), but not walking “pass” that mark as conjectured in the first headline. Also, the use of the expression, “Nigeria’s Corona virus...” clearly demonstrates possessiveness and is clearer and more meaningful to an informed reader, thus making the headline more aesthetic.

India’s Corona virus tally crosses three million mark (Channels TV)

The headline has two aesthetic problems – the first is semantic problem, while the second is brevity problem. Like the BBC headline discussed above, the verb, crosses, is not apt as it still does not convey the original intention of the headline caster, which is exceeding or surpassing. According to the BBC English Dictionary, the word, “cross”, denotes a physical lateral movement of a person from one point to another. Also, one usually crosses a football by kicking it from the edge of a field to another edge, or crosses a river through a bridge or boat, etc!

The second textual aesthetic problem in the headline is on the use of words rather than figures to convey a meaning. According to Udoh (2015), in headline writing, numbers that are more than one digit are better written in figures. This, according to him, is because in headline aesthetics, figures attract more attention than words. Apart from attracting more attention, figures conserve space, thus promoting brevity, which is one of the hallmarks of good headline writing. For instance, the space consumed by 3million or 3m is less than the space occupied by “three million” as used in the headline quoted above. A headline that contains few word are easily noticeable than a verbose headline in the sense that the former will be bolder and more attractive than the latter. A headline that is too lengthy ceases to be a headline and becomes an ordinary unkempt sentence (Udoh, 2015).

Nigeria’s death toll from Covid-19 exceeds 1,000 (Premium Times)

This is a Corona virus headline that is reasonably aesthetically written. For instance, it is brief enough to be understood by any ordinary literate reader; it contains a verb that is precise in meaning; and it abides by the rule of multi-digit number writing in print or visual media journalism and headline writing.

Nigeria recording steady decline in Covid-19 deaths – PTF (The Nation)

This headline has no other aesthetic issue than the use of a verb of continuity, “recording”. Since the headline is from a newspaper, the use of solitary continuous tense, “recording” is not aesthetically apt. The continuous tense makes the headline appear as an incomplete sentence. It would, perhaps, have been appropriate if it was broadcast medium live report. Therefore, instead of giving an aesthetic force to the headline, the continuous verb rather weakens the expression. The headline could have been stronger (more aesthetically semantic) if it sounded thus: *Nigeria records steady decline in Covid-19 deaths – PTF*. This is because the last decline was what was just reported, meaning it may not be declining or the story may change in the next issue of the newspaper. Apart from this, every other word in the headline is syntactically and semantically strong enough to make meaning. Also, it is not lagging in brevity.

Nigeria tests 6000 Covid-19 samples daily, says NCDC (The Nation)

In terms of word selection, this headline is reasonably aesthetic. For instance, while the key noun, “Nigeria”, can make it sell anywhere in the world, the verb, “tests”, is concrete in meaning, and the figure, 6000, is understood by any reader who knows a little about digits. However, the headline appears wordy, even though it contains just nine words. The headline would have sounded stronger, especially to the eye, if the word, “says”, were replaced with a dash. That would have made it sound, *Nigeria tests 6000 Covid-19 samples daily - NCDC*. This could then compare well with an earlier headline posted by *The Nation: Nigeria recording steady decline in Covid-19 death – PTF*. A similar aesthetic error is committed in the following headline: *Children aged 12 and over should wear masks, says WHO* (Channels TV). Again, according to Udoh (2015), readers do not enjoy (feel aesthetic about) headlines that not only long, but also contain words that can be done without, while retaining the original idea.

Another killer virus hits the world (The Telegraph)

Structurally, syntactically, semantically, and in terms of brevity, there is nothing reasonably “unaesthetic” about the above-quoted Corona virus-related headline. However, the headline creates a lot of fear and what may be termed, ethical indecency in the mind of an average reader. Contrary to the real nature of the pandemic, many print news media have tended to emphasize fear in their headlines and general reportage of the disease. An observation of some newspaper headlines suggests that fear has played a particularly vital role in the coverage and headline writing of Corona virus outbreak since reports on it started circulating. According to random observations, about 100 highly circulating newspapers around the world centre their headlines on “fear” about the killer disease.

From the above-explained example, it could be said that the headline quoted above is reasonably unethical and unaesthetic. For instance, it is unethical to instill fear in the mind of readers (Daramola, 1999). This is because unlike the earlier belief that the disease kills fast, it is not actually so; and the discovery of hundreds of vaccines and this shows that Corona virus is not all that fatal. Unlike in other deadly diseases, the number of persons who have recovered after contracting it has been on the increase worldwide; and in Europe, tabloids such as *The Sun*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail*, according to observations, are more likely using fear-inducing headline words.

This is China Virus, Trump (CNN, BBC)

It is a truism that many newspapers have, in an attempt to hit the newsstand with something sensational, end up promoting racism and hate speech. This is not only generally unethical, but purely untrue because there has never been any pandemic called China Virus. In the US for example, President Donald Trump openly and repeatedly refers to Covid-19 as the “Chinese Virus”, as quoted above; and this has sparked fears of racially motivated hate actions. According to Udoh, Udosen and Tommy (2019), hate speech such as this must not be celebrated in headlines so that the purveyors are not overly dignified. To him, reporting the reactions to hate speech can be a better way of telling the story. Therefore, Covid-19 reporting must be done with uttermost respect for human life and sensibilities. This is not only ethical; it is aesthetic too.

Conclusion

Although, according to individual differences theory, different people usually have different aesthetic abilities, exposures and beliefs, meaning that different headlines appeal differently to different readers, a well-crafted and well delivered headline, like the golden fish, cannot only be attractive to a trained eye or ear; it can also be a pleasure to read or listened to. So, by demonstrating the aesthetic and ethical appropriateness of some Corona

virus related news headlines published by select news media around the world, this article has not only proved the relevance of aesthetics in news headline writing and presentation, but has challenged news headline writers to consider the fact that esthetically and ethically crafted headlines make great readership, listenership and viewership.

With this in mind, it is the position of this article that an aesthetically appealing headline does not only give an aesthetic personality to a newspaper, radio or television, but is capable of also winning more patronage. The hope, however, is that stakeholders in news headline production enterprise will view headlining not only as an art, but as an art that should produce an aesthetic feeling in the minds of the audience.

Recommendations

In this era of journalistic competitiveness, occasioned by citizen and high speed journalism, aesthetically and ethically-minded editors and headline writers should:

- i. Remember the rule of the thumb and carefully cross check syntax, semantics, mechanics, ethical implications, and number of words before writing headlines and/or posting or publishing their news.
- ii. Maintain objectivity and do not be caught in the hype frenzy and rumour mill or unethical headlining.

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