

Exploring the Surveillance Role of the Media in Public Awareness on Covid-19 in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study explores the surveillance role of the media in creating awareness on the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The aim of the study is to underscore the strategic roles played by the media in communicating the outbreak of the COVID-19 to the public. The study utilises library research method and critical observations to underscore the role of the media in responding to health emergencies. It hinges on the Agenda Setting Theory of the press to demonstrate how the media draw the attention of the public to prevailing national issues that require change in health behaviour and practices among citizens. The study argues that the media are inevitable in the dissemination of information on health related crisis. However, for the media to effectively carry out these functions adequately, they need to constantly monitor the environment so that they can spot fake news or information that may negatively impact on the lives of the people and counter them accordingly. To this end, government and key stakeholders in the society should train and educate the public on how to spot fake information so as to avoid them. The study strongly advocates that media literacy is the best option to facilitate this novel objective, hence, the need for a synergy among media workers and other stakeholders deployed to contain health crises in Nigeria. This will go a long way to guard against reporting conflicting information on national health emergencies as experienced in the on-going fight against COVID-19.

Keywords: Surveillance, Media, Coronavirus, Epidemic and Nigeria.

Introduction

The world has recorded the outbreak of several viruses that caused deadly diseases in the past few years. For instance, deadly diseases such as Ebola Virus Disease, Human Papilloma Virus, Asian Bird Flu and SARS were

some of the health epidemics that have claimed the lives of so many people across the world. Through these virus infections, several individuals and families have been incapacitated by the deaths of their loved ones. Despite the havoc caused by the numerous health epidemics experienced in the past none can be compared with the current COVID-19 pandemic which is ravaging the entire world. Nigeria recorded its first COVID-19 case on February 27th, 2020. The virus, which originated from Wuhan in China at the end of 2019, has infected millions of people since 31st December 2019. As of 13th September 2020, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020) reported 28 802 775 confirmed positive cases of the virus, including 920 931 deaths.

Nigeria's index case was confirmed by the Virology Laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, one of the laboratories with the capacity to diagnose COVID-19 in Nigeria at the time. Since then, the number of cases in Nigeria has grown, initially with Lagos being the epicenter of the pandemic in Nigeria. Currently, the virus has spread to several cities in Nigeria (Alagboso and Abubakar, 2020). The Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) reported about 56,017 positive cases by the end of September 2020, with over a thousand fatalities (NCDC, 2020). These figures have improved significantly since then.

It is important to note that since the COVID-19 was discovered in Nigeria, the government has come up with several measures to contain it. From the moment the first case was reported in Nigeria, the Nigerian government and its agencies initiated several health, economic, security and social responses to contain the disease and its impact on society. For example, since March 2020, borders have been shut, lockdowns imposed, interstate travel banned, and offices, clubs and services considered to be non-essential were closed (Alagboso and

Abubakar, 2020). These drastic measures have negatively affected government and business activities in the country.

One of the fundamental responsibilities of the media is surveillance of the environment. The media perform this function in order to keep the society alert and vigilant in regards to impending dangers that may be risky to the generality of the wellbeing of the people. Health promotion is a cardinal responsibility of the media. The mass media are responsible for disseminating various health messages to ensure healthy living among the audience. The import of this assertion is that at the core of health promotion are the activities of the media to provide information to the citizens as well as communicate government policy directives to the audience to guarantee public safety.

The surveillance role of the media, therefore, entails that the media constitute the eyes and ears of the public. The media provide information and alert the public on the right cause of actions in cases of emergencies so as not to be swayed by unverifiable information that would have negative impact on the health of the people (Lasswell, 2007). Gever (2015) states that, the media owe it as a duty to monitor the environment and report to the society with a view to averting impending dangers. He further observes that the surveillance function of the media occurs when they (media) scan the society, discover looming perilous activities and make them known to the public through their various programmes.

Donohue, Tichenor and Olien (1973) cited in Gever and Ezeah (2020) must have been referring to the surveillance function of the mass media when they submit that knowledge is an essential condiment that people need to take informed decisions in situations of crises. This assertion makes a strong case for media workers to constantly monitor the society and provide relevant and sufficient information to members of the general public. The idea behind the

surveillance function of the mass media is attributed to Lasswell (2007). In the views of Lasswell, the mass media typically play three roles to the society. These are: the surveillance of the environment, the correlation of the different components of society in responding to the environment and the passing of societal heritage from generation to generation. It is in view of this fundamental role vested on the media that the current study explores Nigerian media activities in raising public awareness on the Coronavirus Disease in Nigeria.

An Overview of Coronavirus Disease

Coronavirus Disease otherwise known as COVID-19 is an emerging infectious disease that broke out in December 2019. The contagious disease is traced to China and is presumed to have escaped from a Wuhan Science laboratory. It is a family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) (AbdulAzeez, 2020).

It is worthy to note that after the outbreak of the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or Asian flu and Ebola virus, the emergence of COVID-19 disease commonly known as Coronavirus shook the emotional foundation of the global community (Udende, Akpede and Adisa, 2020). From its insignificance outbreak in China, it spread to other countries of the world. Common signs of the infectious disease include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and other breathing difficulties. (WHO, 2020).

The mode of transmission of COVID-19 is human-to-human specifically through droplets from cough, sneezes and infected surfaces when one gets in contact with. The human-to-human transmission has been described with incubation times between 1-14 days, facilitating spread through droplets and

contaminated hands and surfaces (Kampf, Todd, Pfaender and Steinermann, 2020).

In order to contain the spread of the disease to different states of the country, a multi- sectoral approach was adopted by the government by setting up a COVID-19 response team with the NCDC coordinating the various intervention activities in order to stem the tide of the virus. Several isolation centers were built across the 36 states of the federation including the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

The effects of COVID-19 are quite many. The outbreak of the pandemic led to total economic meltdown of the economy. Several deaths were recorded as a result of the pandemic. Prominent people like government officials were known to have died as a result of COVID-19. For example, Abba Kyari - Nigeria's former Chief of Staff to President Muhammadu Buhari, who died as a result of the virus, is a case in point.

The education sector is the most hit of all the sectors of the Nigerian society; virtually all institutions of learning had to close down their activities. Business activities were brought to a standstill thereby increasing the rate of hunger in the country. This led to high rate of criminal activities like theft, rape, kidnapping and robbery. Social activities were equally suspended to contain the disease. Religious activities were halted to further stop the spread of the virus among religious faithful. It is important to note that with the adverse effects of the pandemic, Nigerian economy is gradually setting into recession.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds relevance in the agenda-setting theory. The theory espouses that the media determine what issues to be considered most important by the society. The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in

1972/1973 (Gever, 2015). Folarin (2000) states that, the agenda-setting theory implies that the media predetermine what issues to think about. According to Folarin, the media do this through frequency of reporting, prominence given to the reports through headline display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics or timing on radio and television.

The theory is relevant to this study because one of the essential roles of the media is to alert the society on issues that affect peaceful coexistence of people. Through media programmes, information on the outbreak of killer diseases can be brought to the knowledge of the people.

In setting the agenda for the public, the media can collaborate with relevant government health agencies to educate the people on the mode of transmission and prevention of health related issues. Within the context of this study, the media have been performing these essential roles since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Through their various programmes, the media have been able to draw the attention of the public to the dangers of the pandemic and safety measures to be adopted to contain its spread.

Literature Review

In the past few months, researchers have focused their attention on the issue of Coronavirus disease. Studies on COVID-19 focus on different perspectives to understanding the pandemic and its effect on the global economy. However, this review explores studies focusing on the dynamics of media institutions in responding to this global health crisis. Somtoo and Chiweta-Oduah (2020) in their study on the various strategies adopted by the media in their response to the COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria explores the strategic role of the media with particular focus on film in providing interventions in crisis situations. The study found that film is an important mass media tool for health/healthy communication towards behavioural change during a crisis because of its

persuasive physiognomies and its ability to evoke audiences' emotions and induce people into taking positive health actions.

The study further established that in the wake of COVID-19 in Nigeria, the country adopted several pre-and-on-the crisis response strategies to handle the crisis including documentaries by Actors Guild of Nigeria, Animated Videos, Pre-instructing strategies, lockdowns, social distancing, use of celebrities/influencers, and screening at different ports of entries in the country among several others. The study recommended that for effective behavioural health change to occur during a crisis, the mass media especially films must be adopted in the sensitization and education of the masses as this would help in instilling in them certain behaviours required for survival.

In a cross-sectional study to determine public knowledge, attitudes and practices towards COVID-19 in Malaysia, Azlan, Hamzah, Sern, Ayub, and Mohamad (2020) research found that most respondents (83.1%) held positive attitudes toward the successful control of the virus. Findings from the study also indicate that majority of respondents (83.4%) took several precautions such as avoiding crowds and practicing proper hand hygiene and wearing of face masks. The study demonstrated the important role of the media in educating the public during times of health crisis.

In a related study, Reuben, Danladi, Saleh and Ejembi (2020) investigated the level of complaints to the measures put in place by Nigerian government in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic in the North-Central region of Nigeria during the national lockdown period. Employing the survey research design and the questionnaire as the instrument of data collection, the study found that residents of North-Central Nigeria had good knowledge (99.5%) of COVID-19. Most of the respondents said they got knowledge of the epidemic mainly through the internet/social media, radio and Television. The study also

discovered that majority of the respondents (79.5%) had positive attitudes toward the adherence of government measures adopted to curtail the disease. However, (52.1%) of the respondents perceived that the government was not doing enough to curtail COVID-19 in Nigeria. Most of the respondents were of the opinion that government interventions towards cushioning the hardships of the masses were being politicized. The study concluded that community-based health campaigns were necessary to hold optimistic attitudes and practice appropriate intervention measures devoid of misconceptions.

Gever and Ezeah's (2020) research focused on the role of time in moderating media contents in the wake of a health crisis. The main objective of the study was to take into account how media report differs based on when a global outbreak is confirmed in a country and when it is not. The scholars focused on the time Coronavirus disease was discovered in December 2019 in China. The study sampled six media stations comprising of radio, television and newspapers respectively. The study employed content analysis. Findings showed that there were few stories about the virus before it was confirmed in Nigeria. But as soon as Nigeria recorded a confirmed case, the number of stories tripled. The study further noted that story format and recommendation on health behaviour were also closely linked to the COVID-19 status of Nigeria. However, the study did not find an association between Nigeria's COVID-19 status and policy recommendation among the media studied. Therefore, the researchers concluded that Nigerian media did not provide sufficient health warning messages on COVID-19 before its spread in the country.

Sambhav (2020) examined the role and challenges of the media in communicating COVID-19 pandemic in India. The study found that the various media of communication played a very significant role in making people aware about the health epidemic ravaging the world. However, the

study discovered many challenges at ground level in spreading information to the people across different parts of India. Prominent among these challenges was the spread of fake news and sensationalism among different media outlets in India. The study concluded by recommending that media professionals should maintain and exhibit high level of professionalism in the conduct of their activities during health emergency situations.

Research Methodology

The study utilised the library research technique to gather data for the work. Most of the information sources were drawn from previous literature. Thus, secondary sources were used to gather data. The data were gathered from journals, periodicals, textbooks and online materials. In addition, critical observations by the researchers were also utilised to analyze events relating to the pandemic.

Discussion

The media are pivotal organs in promoting health knowledge and education in emergency circumstances. Adekunle (2010) cited in Agbo and Chukwuma (2017) avers that as the information gateway of the public, the media in particular have an important role to play in combating the spread of viruses/diseases and mitigating both the health and social impact of health crisis in the society. The responsibilities of the media are amongst, others, to inform and disseminate health information and frequently cover health-related issues. That is to say that media coverage is an essential strategy of health education. This is because through media coverage, the general public will be informed and instructed on issues related to public health issues. That means also that the surveillance role of the mass media is essential in the study of media coverage of health issues (Gever and Ezeah, 2020).

In a situation of health crisis, the media play the role of being sources of correct information and advocates for correct health behaviours, but before the media can play that role, they need to understand the nature, mode of transmission, prevention, policies and practices recommended by professional bodies or agencies before disseminating such information to the public (Asemah, Nkwam-Uwaoma and Santas, 2017).

Health authorities educate and entrust the media with essential health information, which is then relayed to the public in readily accessible formats through a variety of media channels (Unit for Sight, 2015 cited in Asemah, Nkwam-Uwaoma and Santas, 2017). The media help health workers expand their audience reach, which is crucial considering the fact that face-to-face channels of communication often require too many human resources and reach only a small number of people in large, underserved rural areas. According to Catalan- Matamoros (2011) cited in Agbo and Chukwuma (2017), there are four important things the mass media must do in transmitting health messages. They are:

- i. Mobilizing and supporting local agencies and professionals who have direct access to individuals within the target population.
- ii. Bringing together partnerships of public, voluntary and private sector bodies and professional organizations.
- iii. Informing and educating the public, but also setting the agenda for public debate about the health topic, thereby modifying the climate of opinion surrounding it.
- iv. Encouraging local and national policy changes so as to create a supportive environment within which people are more able to change their behaviour.

Since 27th February 2020 when Nigeria reported its first case of Coronavirus in the state of Lagos, with an index case of a man who arrived in the country on 25th February from Milan, Italy, ever since the index case was reported by the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), the Nigerian media have consistently educated the public on the pandemic. In a swift reaction to contain the virus, President Muhammadu Buhari on March 9th, 2020, constituted the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 chaired by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Boss Mustapha, with membership from various MDAs. Since then, the PTF has coordinated a multi-stakeholder response to the pandemic, while providing technical and material support to states to manage the outbreak (Alagboso and Abubakar, 2020).

The Presidential Task Force also serves as an advisory body to the president on specific decisions such as imposing and lifting lockdowns and providing daily feedback to Nigerians on the work being done to contain the pandemic through daily media briefings with journalists. Some of the members of the PTF include the Ministers of Health, Foreign Affairs, Information, Humanitarian Affairs, the Director General of NCDC. Dr. Sani Aliyu was appointed as the National Coordinator of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (Alagboso and Abubakar, 2020).

In their usual characteristic manner, Nigerian media organizations swung into action to perform their responsibility of feeding the public with information on COVID-19. Since communication is a vital component in providing surveillance information by the media in terms of monitoring general conversations and engaging with the public, the NCDC Connect Centre was created to manage NCDC toll-free line, WhatsApp and SMS platforms.

As part of its risk communications activities, the NCDC in collaboration with other organizations produced and shared multimedia content, including videos, infographics, and audio jingles, in various languages, targeting different demographics. This has helped to increase awareness about COVID-19 and enlighten many Nigerians on how to protect themselves and stay safe. Beyond providing quality information, the communication efforts have actively addressed misinformation and fake news which has been very common since the outbreak started. These efforts have largely leveraged on technology, including automated WhatsApp messages, a dedicated website, and regular online live sessions, with support from social media platforms and Nigerian telecommunication companies sending public health messages to their customers (Alagboso and Abubakar, 2020).

The broadcast media - radio and television were not left out. Several stations produced jingles, public service announcements and various programmes on COVID-19 in order to educate Nigerians on the virus. On the other hand, print media organizations were basically relating information on COVID-19 through their online platforms as government decision to imposed lockdown had affected productions of hard copy publications. Majority of media audience resorted to social media, radio and television to get information on the pandemic.

One remarkable development within the lockdown period was the use of social media and other digital devices to engage students across different levels of education. For instance, some states government broadcast stations like Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo States decided to engage their students through educational broadcasting via radio, television and the social media. This was necessary so that the students or pupils will not forget what they have been taught in school. The media provided these services throughout the lockdown period.

Furthermore, in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria, in an attempt to educate citizens and kids on the lockdown precautionary measures taken by the Nigerian Government to fight against COVID-19, some Nigerian establishments in conjunction with filmmakers created documentaries and animated videos to effectively communicate the crisis and by disseminating preventive and precautionary information to the masses with special target on the kids. The 90 minutes animated film provided both education and entertainment to Nigerian children (Somtoo and Chiweta-Oduah, 2020).

In the sphere of the entertainment industry, short WhatsApp videos, YouTube and Facebook became the arena where most people derived their entertainment. With the imposition of national lockdown by the government all social and entertainment activities came to a standstill. People resorted to their mobile devices to keep themselves entertained throughout the lockdown period.

It is worth mentioning here that, as a result of the fallout of the national lockdown majority of media audience migrated online to get information on virtually every issue. With this development came an avalanche of unprecedented cybercrime and frauds perpetrated by men of the underworld. These disgruntled elements took advantage of the lockdown to send fake information to people on social media platforms in order to swindle them of their resources. The situation heightened when the government decided to give out palliatives to the people. In so many instances, the government and its agencies had to refute several false information that were circulating on various social media platforms so as to protect the unsuspecting audience from these fraudsters.

Conclusion

It is apparently clear that the media of communication are critical and strategic in providing health education during health epidemics. Their strategic roles stem from the fact that they are the channels through which the public rely on for information during health emergencies. As part of the organ or body that provides essential services during emergencies, they are saddled with huge responsibilities to provide guidelines on government policy directives in responding to health issues as well as communicating to the public on the dangers of resorting to self-help measures to manage health crisis.

The study noted that new media technologies were used as channels to spread fake information and sensationalized the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country. In view of these challenges, the study conclude that media audience need knowledge on how to identify fake information on social media so as not to fall victims of cybercrime perpetrators. In addition, government should always be prompt and proactive in monitoring and responding to fake information on social media in order to provide direction to members of the public against unscrupulous individuals. The study equally recommends a synergy among media workers and relevant stakeholders to contain health crisis in Nigeria. This will go a long way to guard against reporting conflicting information on the coverage of future national health crises.

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