

Medical Journalism and the Challenges of Accurate Information and Communication Following the Outbreak of Corona Virus in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth conceptual analysis of the expectations and performance of the mass media in public health concerns and emergencies and specifically in the dreaded corona pandemic from the perspective of medical journalism as an aspect of the broader health communication. This is an aspect of journalism that utilize strategic communication techniques and technologies to improve personal, environmental, individual and public health by effective gathering, storage, processing and dissemination of health related news and information in the society. The media as a critical social institution is obliged to keep the society abreast of all contending socio political and economic issues in the society by providing objective interpretation of events to the best understanding of the populace. The paper argues that effective utilization of the conventional media in information and news dissemination will ultimately enhance citizens' understanding of the mystery, ambiguity and controversy associated with corona virus pandemic in Kano state.

Keywords: Corona virus pandemic, media, public perception

Introduction

Corona virus (Covid 19) is a pandemic that spreaded like a wildfire virtually hitting all the countries of the world. It started in December 2019, which originated from Wuhan, Hubei province in China that gradually reached virtually every corner of the globe. The pandemic caught the world unaware which resulted in serious scare, jitters, the closing of all businesses and shutting the doors in to every country. The international community acted in the same manner in the use of facemasks, disinfecting and washing of hands, creating social distancing, isolation of infected persons and closing the doors of virtually all nations. The result is a serious health and economic devastation that will be remembered for a long time to come.

The corona virus (covid 19) first appeared in Wuhan the capital city of Hubei province, China as a local problem, but all of a sudden, it started separading like a wildfire which made it a world pandemic that rapidly affected all the countries of the world. Everyone seemed to be unaware and even the advanced nations were caught ill-prepared, this, therefore, gave a devastating blow to many countries inflicting casualties and so many death tolls. Historically, a similar situation erupted in the 1918 influenza pandemic, which was the most severe that was caused by an H1N1 virus with genes of avian origin. Although there was no universal consensus regarding where the virus originated, it spreaded worldwide during 1918-1919. In the United States for example, it was first identified in military personnel in the spring of 1918. It was estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with this virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States (NCIRD 2019). The fear of the kind of devastation the H1N1 virus meted on the world population, has indeed, provided a strong speculation that it may reoccur in the 2019 coronavirus pandemic situation. This has also brought an alert signal asking the international community to try and prepare for the worst,

which made the center for disease control and prevention (NCDC) to provide constant information through the media and catchy slogans on a twenty-four hour, seven days a week basis on ways and strategies of saving lives and protecting people.

It is based on the premise above that this paper provides a conceptual direction of the expected performance of the mass media during a public health crisis and particularly amid the corona virus pandemic.

Health communication: An Overview

Health communication encompasses the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health. It links the domains of communication and health and is increasingly recognized as a necessary element of efforts to improve personal and public health. Health communication can contribute to all aspects of disease prevention and health promotion and is relevant in a number of contexts, including (1) health professional-patient relations, (2) individuals' exposure to, search for, and use of health information, (3) individuals' adherence to clinical recommendations and regimens, (4) the construction of public health messages and campaigns, (5) the dissemination of individual and population health risk information, that is, risk communication, (6) images of health in the mass media and the culture at large, (7) the education of consumers about how to gain access to the public health and health care systems, and (8) the development of tele health applications.

For individuals, effective health communication can help raise awareness of health risks and solutions, provide the motivation and skills needed to reduce these risks, help them find support from other people in similar situations, and affect or reinforce attitudes.¹ Health communication also can increase demand for appropriate health services and decrease demand for inappropriate health services. It can make available information to assist in making complex choices, such as selecting health plans, care providers, and treatments.

For the community, health communication can be used to influence the public agenda, advocate for policies and programs, promote positive changes in the socioeconomic and physical environments, improve the delivery of public health and health care services, and encourage social norms that benefit health and quality of life.

The practice of health communication has contributed to health promotion and disease prevention in several areas. One is the improvement of interpersonal and group interactions in clinical situations (for example, provider-patient, provider, and among members of a health care team) through the training of health professionals and patients in effective communication skills. Collaborative relationships are enhanced when all parties are capable of good communication.

Another area is the dissemination of health messages through public education campaigns that seek to change the social climate to encourage healthy behaviors, create awareness, change attitudes, and motivate individuals to adopt recommended behaviors. Campaigns traditionally have relied on mass media (such as public service announcements on billboards, radio, and television) and educational messages in printed materials (such as pamphlets) to deliver health messages. Other campaigns have integrated mass media with community based programs. Many campaigns have used social marketing techniques.

Increasingly, health improvement activities are taking advantage of digital technologies, such as CD-ROM and the World Wide Web (Web), that can target audiences, tailor messages, and engage people in interactive, ongoing exchanges about health. An emerging area is health communication to support community centered prevention. Community-centered prevention shifts attention from the individual to group-level change and emphasizes the empowerment of individuals and communities to effect change on multiple levels.

Health journalism or medical journalism, as defined by Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) & WHO, “is the presentation of health information in the media (the press, internet and electronic media), usually in sections relating to news and in service sections such as health supplements, feature articles, radio and television programme, health blogs, health counseling columns, such as healthy recipes and diets, among others” (Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) & WHO, (1997). It is an aspect of the broader field of health communication concerned with using journalistic knowledge, training and skills strategically to promote and improve public health. It is a special branch of journalism bordering on public affairs, medicine and scientific journalism.

There are many varied forms of health journalism practices, ranging from health news reporting and analysis of studies to health features, which use specially designed contents and style to attract broad audiences interested in health issues. In some countries, such as the United States, health journalism is a subspecialty of scientific journalism. To this end, the American Medical Association sponsors Annual Science Reporters Conferences and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides continuing education and training programmes for journalists on the use of theories and health models to frame health reporting. Thus, in general, health journalism is primarily concerned with promoting public understanding and creating general awareness about available options and choices on health delivery system and the need for the individual and community to make informed choice and demand for better health services. This is even more central to coverage of health emergencies by the media especially health issues surrounding Covid-19 reportage in Nigeria.

Health news coverage or reportage in journalism is about gathering, processing and dissemination of credible information to serve public interest and concerns on public health matters. Generally speaking news is the most important concern of all journalistic activities. It is the key function of journalism profession. One can rightly argue that without news journalism may not have existed at all as we know it today.

The major functions of the news media is to inform, educate and entertain the public. “Good journalism” as Frost, (2020) argued can entertain, but good journalism’s main role is to inform and educate the public, and this is especially relevant to coverage of health emergency to underline why this is true (Frost, 2020).

Performance of the media in corona virus pandemic

The term media refers to different means of communication. Christensson (2006) notes that television, radio, and newspapers are amongst the different types of media although the social media and the World Wide Web (www) are now a large part of what is now referred to as new media. The media plays an important role in dispensing news and information to the masses. A free media is a critical part in establishing and safeguarding the values and tenets of democracy. Janssen (2017) defined media as communication outlets or tools which are used to store and deliver information or data. Giving the history of media, Taylor (2020) explains that it was not until the invention of new technologies that mass media really came to life. The first paper was invented in China around 100 B.C.E, but it was not until after 1,500 years later that Johannes Gutenberg built the first printing press. This invention meant that papers could be produced in mass. In the early 17th century, the first newspaper was made and by the late 19th century; technology had allowed photographs to be printed on newspaper. By November 2, 1920, a radio in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania went on air to report the result of that year’s United States of America’s presidential election, eight years later, pictures were added to sound and in 1965, the first two computers communicated with each other and the internet evolution started from there. From then on, the media has gradually shifted from traditional to the new media as we have it now.

Mass media, a term coined in the 1920s following the growing trend of newspapers, magazines, as well as the invention of radio and television within this period. Media can be classified into four types, print media (newspapers, magazines), broadcast media (TV, Radio), outdoor or out of home, internet (BBA Mantra, 2019). For the print media, newspapers and magazines are the major source of information, it offers flexibility and has a widespread coverage; under broadcast media, we have television and radio which also have a wide coverage and provide access to information for those who cannot read. Outdoor media on the other hand is not really a source of news, but it is a major means of advertising with considerable reach. Lastly, the internet provides an opportunity to exchange information through a series of interconnected computers, it does provide sophisticated graphic user interface while making use of World Wide Web to showcase its content to users. Over the years, distinctions have been made as to what traditional media and new media are and their meanings to various users. The major difference between both concepts is that while traditional media targets audience through billboards, print advertising, radio and television, the new media targets its audience through social media (internet) and the World Wide Web (www).

Carufel (2018) cited a Columbia Business School research which analyzed the news consumption in 18 countries and reported that television news is by far the most dominant, respected and trusted source of news. The same research also looked into some of the world's most powerful news organizations such as CNN, FOX News, Sky News, BBC and TF1, reporting that countries of the world are currently been starved of accurate and quality information with a distinct subset of the population relying on one or two sources of information. In the United States for instance the major news organizations seem to be polarizing and aligned with the ideologies of the two major political parties as they are now more or less state run media just as seen in countries like China and Russia. The Chinese and Qatari governments in the past years have started understanding the importance of media as agent to shape public opinions and perception by controlling public discourse for state use through the media. And this is the reason for their acquisition and/or investment into media such as China Global Television Network and Al Jazeera television network.

It is not always smooth with media especially in covering sensitive issues, as the media clash with government where government tries to clip the media's wings as portrayed by Aljazeera TV (3 May 2020), accordingly Cincurova (2020) states that in Venezuela rights groups claimed that 10 journalists have been detained and more than two dozen threatened due to work on the pandemic. When Venezuelan photojournalist Rosali Hernandez started taking pictures of COVID-19 patients in one of the main hospitals of Caracas in March 2020, she was met by a member of the armed forces. "He asked me to give him my telephone and camera. When I refused, he forced me to erase all of my materials, including the photographs I had taken before entering the hospital," said Hernandez, who works for the online news outlet Caraota Digital.

Hernandez is not alone, more than 35 other journalists and media outlets have been victims of smear campaigns, lawsuits, threats, persecution and confiscation of their equipment, preventing them from reporting on COVID-19 cases.

While Southwick (2020) (Aljazeera 3 May 2020) added that "In Venezuela, the COVID-19 pandemic has only provided more excuses for the government to repress and censor critical media activities, in what was already one of the most challenging countries for the press in Latin America," According to Serrano (2020) (Aljazeera 3 May 2020), the general coordinator of Redes Ayuda, who told Al Jazeera TV that if journalists are not allowed to report, "the government is violating not only their right to work, but also the right of the people to be informed, which is essential to understand the magnitude of the pandemic". He added that "this censorship is part of a systematic policy of control over the population, controlling

everything in people's lives, from the information they receive to the food that they eat - which generates a population that is used to dictatorship".

In marking the 2020 World Press Freedom Day on Sunday 3 May 2020, the News outlets, publishers and One Free Press Coalition has called for the immediate release of all imprisoned journalists amid increasing threats to press freedom worldwide during the coronavirus pandemic.

In Pakistan, according to Aljazeera (3 May 2020) The CEO, owner and editor-in-chief of Jang Media Group, Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman, was arrested on March 12 over a case involving allegations that he illegally acquired land in 1986. The next day, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority ordered cable distributors throughout the country to stop transmitting Geo TV, which is owned by Jang Media Group and is the nation's largest television news channel, or move its broadcasts to a harder-to-find channel, evidently because Geo TV has criticized the government's coronavirus preparations. All these and related issues are linked to the difficulties that journalists encounter during the coverage of Corona virus. Whatever brings in censorship and limitations is part of the political angles that escorts the corona virus pandemic.

COVID-19: A Global Pandemic

COVID-19 is an infection resulting from the newly discovered strain of coronavirus (WHO, 2020). The virus emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, China. This virus is transmitted from human to human through droplets from cough or when inhaled from an infected person and by touching contaminated droplet surfaces and then touching the eyes, nose or mouth (European Centre for Disease Control, 2020). It has been stated that the likely ecological reservoir for COVID-19 are bats although it is believed that the virus skipped the species barrier to humans via another intermediate animal host. The symptoms include fever, dry cough, fatigue, sputum production, dysphonia, sore throat, headache, and myalgia while mild symptoms include diarrhea and vomiting. At present, the coronavirus is affecting 212 countries and territories with over 200,000 thousand deaths globally (World meters, 2020). It should however be noted that COVID 19 is a variant of the coronavirus, for example in 2003, the Chinese population was infected with a virus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) while in 2012, another variant of coronavirus was diagnosed among a couple of Saudi Arabia. None of these strains of coronavirus have however wrecked so much havoc like the COVID-19. Currently, there is no reliable vaccine or antiviral treatment for coronavirus, with WHO announcing that the vaccine for COVID-19 can only be available on a massive scale in 18 months (Wu, Wu, Liu, and Yang, 2020); in light of this, prevention and control are the best available options.

On February 27, 2020, the first confirmed case of coronavirus in Nigeria was announced. It was an Italian who landed in Lagos and moved down to Ogun state to the cement factory where he works; he developed Fever and was transferred back to Lagos where he was diagnosed with the virus and a team of epidemiologists traced his contacts (Maclean and Dahir, 2020). By March 9, 2020, the second case of coronavirus was announced in Ogun state, this time it was a local who had come in contact with the Italian. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) has been praised for their level of preparedness for the outbreak of coronavirus. As early as January 28, 2020, surveillance was already in place at five international airports in the country to prevent the spread of the virus. The Nigeria Centre or Disease Control also announced that a preparedness group was already in place to be activated when needed. While the first case was discharged in March, since then Nigeria has seen sporadic increase in the number of confirmed cases. Efforts to control the spread of the virus by the Nigerian government has been commendable as they placed a travel ban on 13 countries with high cases of the virus, the Lagos state government banned all religious gathering of more

than 50 persons for 30 days while the Ogun state government followed suit. On March 29, 2020, the federal government instructed residents of Lagos and Ogun States as well as the Federal Capital Territory to stay at home for a period of two weeks, subsequent extensions have been made and different states of the country have also put in place measures to curb the spread of the virus.

While the incidence of coronavirus is starting to slow down across different parts of the world, the number of confirmed cases across the African continent seems to be growing. In Nigeria, the number of confirmed cases had jumped from hundreds as at April, 2020 to thousands by May, 2020. The initial restrictions placed to battle the pandemics have disrupted the economies of countries globally, but now the countries of the world are starting to chart a course out of restrictive lockdowns. Although, a vaccine is yet to be recommended for definite use, preliminary result from the clinical trial of a drug in the United States showed promising result in accelerating the recovery rate of COVID-19 patients. The experimental drug is yet to pass through the FDA's usual benchmark, while for now it is only approved for emergency use.

Public reaction towards Corona virus Pandemic in Nigeria: the role of the media

Just as the media space in other countries of the world has become saturated with misinformation, the Nigerian media space is not left out. Hassan (2020) said in her write-up that many Nigerians simply refuse to believe the disease's existence. This distrust cannot be entirely blamed on illiteracy and disinformation; it is also combined with half-truths and health misinformation which is not entirely new to Nigeria. In 2014 as at the time of the Ebola virus, false news was spreaded that bathing and ingesting saltwater is capable of stopping the virus in its tracks. This same pattern of misinformation rare its head again during the COVID-19 outbreak when the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump publicly declared that chloroquine was capable of treating coronavirus. Coupled with having to deal with COVID-19, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control has to combat false news. At the beginning of the spread of the virus, an alleged WHO official predicted that about 45 million Nigerians would die as a result of the pandemic. Other misinformation were also circulated that heat is capable of neutralizing the virus while others have claimed that Africans are immune to Coronavirus. The political power players were not left out of this as they politicized the pandemic and were seeking to gain political points.

Although the coronavirus has grown to become a worldwide phenomenon, the media has played a vital role in mass hysteria. Initial misinformation floating around was that the virus was engineered in a lab in Wuhan, China while others linked the symptoms with 5G mobile network being installed across the world. The wording of the virus as 'Wuhan virus' or Chinese Virus has also been stoking xenophobia attacks and fear and it is important that this misinformation be curbed and dispelled. Contradicting information from news outlets has also gone a long way in shaping the public reaction towards the pandemic. As early as January 14 2020, WHO tweeted that human to human transmission of COVID-19 had not been reported yet. This tweet has come to haunt both the Chinese government and WHO as there has been accusation of cover-up with report from a University of Southampton showing that there was 95% of preventing the spread of the virus if the Chinese government intervened 3 weeks sooner (Givas, 2020).

Common platforms for this misinformation in Nigeria seem to be the new media. WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular followed by Twitter and Instagram. The traditional media such as Radio, Television, and Newspaper activities are easily monitored by the appropriate government agencies, however the new media gives little to no control to the Nigeria government to dispel rumours and false news as this power largely resides with platforms ownership. Although the ownership of these platforms has made huge efforts to

ensure that only accurate information is shared, there is still a long way to go in limiting or total stoppage of rumor and false news on the platforms. A combination of fear and absence of credible information in the early stages of the outbreak are the largest contributors to mass hysteria. The objectives of news outlets include informing and educating the public, however they also have an obligation to shareholders, owners, advertisers, therefore there is an inclination to stoke the fires of hysteria to favour these interest groups (Rochweg, Parke, Murthy, Fernando, Shannon, 2020). In Nigeria, various media houses currently run programmes to dispel the myths surrounding the pandemic while also actively educating the masses on prevention, transmission, spread and ways to keep them safe. The NCDC alongside the Presidential task force on COVID-19 also hold daily briefings updating the masses as regards the pandemic while hotlines are made available for reports and enquiries. While these efforts are laudable, there is still the need to scale up the efforts of the public relation unit of the NCDC, for instance, the twitter handle of the NCDC basically only post daily updates without interacting or responding to questions or complaints by the public.

In light of the importance of media in shaping public reaction and controlling mass hysteria, Collinson, Khan, and Heffernan (2015) identified the importance of media during health crises to include:

1. Mass media campaigns are useful in providing information regarding vaccination development, preventive techniques, drug therapies as well as social distancing measures.
2. Public health programs and campaigns can be used daily to inform the public on latest developments regarding the pandemic.
3. Mass media campaigns are capable of eliciting positive behaviour change as well help in preventing negative behaviors.

The above points have highlighted the importance of accurate information dispensation during pandemics as it helps to shape and form public opinions which eventually determine public perception and their reactions.

Conclusion

Healthcare crisis provides tremendous amount of opportunities for churning out information as well as a boat load of misinformation especially during its early phases. Some of the ways to combat this misinformation is the provision of reliable data by healthcare workers and government health agencies. Another way to do this is to clampdown false news through running of public service announcements, educating, orientating and re-orientating the masses.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to further ensure that accurate information is dispersed and to avoid mass hysteria during healthcare crisis:

1. A major problem with the new media is misinformation; journalists on traditional media can be seen aligning with a particular political ideology and this could affect public trust. While it is difficult to balance politics with science, reporting facts with the intent to provide accurate information should be paramount during this healthcare crises.
2. Despite the constant quest for information during this period, media platforms should critically screen the information which is to be passed out to the public.
3. There is need for media training and retraining for those handling the media channels and public complaints as well as the hotlines of the respective healthcare agencies.
4. Rigorous campaign should be set up by governmental agencies and other related institutions as well as NGOs to educate the masses on the transmission, spread, and preventive strategies of the outbreak.

5. Government and other related agencies must ensure that relevant policies are put in place that will help to clampdown on false information while the public should be constantly educated on safety health measures and health myths should vehemently and quickly be dispelled by relevant authorities through the media.

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