

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). It aims to underscore the strategic roles played by the media in communicating the outbreak of the COVID-19 to the public. The study utilizes library research method 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.

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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 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.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research include:

1. To determine the threats to social networks in Nigeria
2. To determine the social media influence on the spread of information related to Covid-19

Empirical Review

In the past few years, 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.

Threats of Social Networks

The threats to social networks are becoming major setbacks for the technology of internet and its applications. The perpetrators use the on line social networks (OSN)

infrastructure to collect and expose personal information about users and their friends. They often lure users into clicking on specific malicious links. They include inference attacks, de-anonymization attacks, link reconstruction attacks, click jacking, Sybil attacks, socware, fake profile and identity clone attacks etcetera.

A. Native Trust

This crime is often perpetrated on children who are more susceptible to trusting social network friends without question. The said friend's profile may really be a mask for sinister intentions. Not only the children are affected by this act, it is not uncommon for adults too to build up relationship with friends they do not know but trust. The criminals here can steal money and information from their unsuspecting victims.

B. Click Jacking

Click jacking is a malicious technique which tricks users into clicking on something different from what they intended to click. This method involves manipulating unsuspecting user to click an option that triggers the attackers' intention (Benevenuto et al., 2009). This often can result into attacker posting spam messages on to Facebook or other social network account of the user. This illegal act involves the hacking of a personal account using an advertisement for a viral video or article. Once the user clicks on this, the program sends an advert to the person's friend through their account (ContentWatch, 2013).

C. Cyber bullying

Cyber bullying (also refer to as cyber abuse) can be inform of posting rumors or lies about the victim in a public forum, using text messages or emails to send threatening messages, uploading videos to YouTube that embarrass their victims or sharing the victim's personal information in a public forum et cetera. It is simply bullying that takes place within technological communication platforms, such as emails, chats, mobile phones conversations, and online social networks by an attacker who uses the platform to harass his victim by sending repeated hurtful messages, sexual remarks, or threats. By publishing embarrassing pictures or videos of the victim; or by engaging in other inappropriate behavior e.g. spreading cruel rumors about the victim and sharing embarrassing pictures with the victim's network of friends. Cyber bullying usually affects children and teenagers.

D. Fake Profile

Fake profiles are automatic or semi-automatic clone profiles that mimic human behaviors in online social networks. In many cases, fake profiles can be used to harvest personal user data from OSNs. By initiating friend requests to other users in the OSN, who in many cases accept the requests, the fake profile can gather a user's private data which should be exposed only to the user's friends.

E. Identity Clone Attacks

Using this technique, attackers duplicate user's online presence in the same network, or across different networks, in order to deceive the cloned user's friends into forming a trusting relationship with the cloned profile. The attacker can use this trust to collect personal information about the user's friend or to perform various types of online fraud (Acquistic & Gross, 2006)

F. De-Anonymization Attacks

In many online social networks like Twitter and Myspace, users can protect their privacy and anonymity by using pseudonyms. De-anonymization attacks use techniques such as network topology and user group memberships to uncover the user's real identity.

G. Online Predators

The image of Internet predators in the media is of an adult man seducing and tempting innocent young boys and girls through the collection of personal data and the impersonation of being a friend to these youngsters, all the while hiding his sexual intentions until the actual meeting, which likely involves rape or kidnapping.

H. Inference Attacks

Inference attacks in online social networks are used to predict a user's personal and sensitive information that the user has not chosen to disclose, such as religious affiliation and sexual orientation. This type of attacks can be implemented using data mining techniques combined with publicly available OSN data, such as network topology and users' friends' data. They tested their techniques and inferred different Facebook user's attributes, such as educational information, personal tastes and preference, and geographic information. The majority of unprotected information can be mined for targeted advertising and can be a means to more harmful end such as identity theft.

Social Media Influence on the Spread of Information Related to Covid-19

Social media—websites and applications designed to enable quick sharing of contents (information, photos and videos), efficiently, and in real-time (Hudson, 2019) has influenced the knowledge and impact of COVID-19. Social media in the contemporary days serve as the commonest news media especially among youths. It was the means through which information and news reports about COVID-19 was rapidly published and shared in the first few months of 2020 (Ahmad and Murah, 2020). Furthermore, due to the convenience particularly with the use of smart phones, it becomes very ease to make news out of everything within one's environment. With the advent of social media, everyone has become a publisher of news items. The interesting thing about the social media is its persuasive capability, given that it uses the medium of imagery (photo and video sharing) to drive its claims home.

Oftentimes, the verifiability of the information passed via the social media is most times impossible. This can in part be as a result of the difficulty in tracing the source of such information. The unsuspecting members of the public tend to accept without verification the content of the information got from these media outreach. Hence the increased fear, panic and anxiety caused spread by the social among members of society with the emergence of COVID-19 (Ahmad and Murad, 2020).

The influence of social media on corona virus disease cannot be underemphasized. This is because social media has played critical roles, both negative and positive in an attempt to reach out to people on the scourge of COVID-19 which is ravaging the world today. Social media reportage on COVID-19 was necessary and essential to the entire world in 2020 because as reported in Aljazeera news; there are more than 100,000 deaths and well over 1.6 million confirmed cases of this disease world over (Regencia, Stepanky, and Varshalomidze, 2020). This then called for a quick and still calls for a proper sensitization of the global community on attitudes and life styles predisposing people to the virus and its concomitant disease on one hand and the needed habits to be cultivated in order to avert the contraction of the scourge. One thing eminent is that correct messages on the coronavirus pandemic are needed globally. So many people have got a lifesaving/precautionary information on COVID-19 via the social media recently which may include, the right attitudes and life style to adopt, first aid and call in case of suspected cases of the virus infection.

However, the reliance of most individual on social media for information on prevention, first port of call (action to be taken) in case of suspected case and treatment have led to too many preventable deaths. This is because they lacked knowledge on the possible unverified sources of the information they are consuming. These unsuspecting members of the public with total ignorance of the source of the information which oftentimes originate from unprofessional sources and persons completely naïve of the characteristics of the disease rely on it. This has led to the increase in the death toll related to COVID-19.

In addition, coronavirus as dreaded as it is, could not have dealt too much blow of deaths on the world as it did without the fears created by this media outreach. So many people due to the amplifying role of social media on the disease saw COVID-19 as a sure death sentence that cannot be survived once one gets down on it. Ahmad and Murah (2020) reported that social media had a significant impact on the spread of fear and panic related to COVID-19 outbreak in Iraq Kurdistan and negatively influence the mental health and psychological wellbeing of participants. They concluded that social media contributed to the spread of panic and anxiety related to COVID-19 among youth aged 18-35 years. Apart from the copious fears it generated, social media peddles too many phony 'solutions' to the challenges already posed by the disease. Such acclaimed solution rather counteracts the conscious and genuine efforts of the qualified health experts in combating COVID-19. Take for instance, on 8th April, 2020, in Iran more than 700 people died after taking an alcohol substance

(toxic methanol) which was believed to have COVID-19 curative potentials as circulated in the Iranian social media (Regencia, Stepansky, and Varshalomidze, 2020).

Similar incident took place in Nigeria when the social media brought a seemingly genuine report that the Chloroquine tablets can be taken to prevent the attack of the virus (Grady, 2020). Many feeble minds bought and consumed the drugs abusively in order to build the immunity in their system so as to ward off the virus. This however led to the further breakdown on the health of such individuals thereby predisposing them to the virus due to weak immune system. The news about the efficacy of chloroquine or hydroxychlorine over the prevention of corona virus led to the increase in price of the drug. On the treatment of coronavirus, the social media curative centre has prescribed some deadly mixtures for the treatment of the COVID-19. Aside the 'preventive' chloroquine drug as prescribed by social media, such other concoctions as lime, grape, orange, lemon and watermelon etcetera, when cooked together with some quantity of alcoholic substances without pilling the backs was recommended for the treatment of coronavirus. These substances no doubt could be very acidic and has the potentials of weakening the body immune system, predisposing the unsuspecting consumer to any kind of disease in circulation (COVID-19 inclusive).

The fake news peddled in the social media that the taxi driver who drove the Italian with the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Nigeria from Lagos to Ogun State threatened to infect everyone in the country except the government accepts to pay him the sum of one hundred million naira (N100,000,000). This information even though it was later debunked in BBC news pidgin published in March, 2020, had created anxiety and fear among the people of Nigeria that, many if not all could have got infected with the disease. Then again, the social media outlets in Nigeria are also culprit of the fake news publications on the resistant nature of the black pigment (dark complexion of the nationals) which is believed to insulate them from contraction of coronavirus. This was one of the arguments raised as to why there are no coronavirus cases in the country. Since the virus attacks the whites, there is no gain locking down the means of livelihood of the blacks who are naturally immune from contracting it. The high death rate of the black Americans in the United States of America as reported by Calma (2020) shows that COVID-19 does not trade on a line of pigment. Though the blacks were most hit, the whites are also dying in that state.

Research Methodology

The study utilized 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.

Major Findings

Based on the library study, the following are major findings:

1. That social media have negative threats to the cyberspace.
2. Those social media platforms do influence the spread of information related to Covid-19.

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 concluded that media audience need knowledge on how to identify fake information on social media so as not to fall victims of cybercrime perpetrators.

Recommendations

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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