

MEDIA ROLE IN REPORTING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Globally, mass media play a very significant role in human life. This is because the media are all around us from the show on television such as music, movies and news, to jingles on the radio, and news reports on newspapers. These media offerings engender mutual understanding, socialisation, knowledge, entertainment, and surveillance if presented in a fair, unbiased and non-inflammatory manner. It is widely accepted that what we know about, think, and believe, outside of personal first-hand experience, is shaped by how these events are reported in the frontline medium especially during an outbreak of strange disease (s) where fear and panic thrive. It is against this backdrop that this study explores media role in reporting COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study adopts the Social

Responsibility theory. It also adopts the qualitative methodology and relies on secondary data generated from relevant headlines from newspapers, television, and radio. The study found that the media, through their reports, are powerful agents in controlling the infection rate and control of the disease. The media also had the potential to unite the people who survived the disease and end their stigmatisation by constantly informing, creating awareness, and educating the general public on the government activities and safety protocols. The study recommends that the media should be integrated into medical emergency management protocol by health authorities in Nigeria, specialised training for journalists on Covid-19 mitigation measures, and institutional support for the media to continue to play its societal roles effectively.

Key words: Surveillance, Media, Protocol, Pandemic, Covid-19

Introduction

Mass media play a very significant role in human life. This is because the media are all around us from the headlines news on television, radio, newspaper etc. to other media activities such as entertainment, and sports. Without the mass media, the populace would be isolated, not only from the rest of the world but from governments' activities, socio-economic development and healthcare services. The flow and access to information is important for development in social, political, environmental, and even religious services. Without a wide array of information on radio, television, newspapers, and other media channels, government, and institutional activities at national and global levels would be severely hampered. The advent of the mass media and their presence in our daily lives has facilitated self-expression, persuasion, dialogue, and interaction.

These are important especially in times of unprecedented health emergency like Covid-19.

According to Okunna (1999), the mass media perform a number of functions which benefit the individual as a member of a society. These functions range from serious informational function to lighter functions like entertainment, correlation, surveillance etc. National development, political, social and economic conscientization can hardly take place without the mass media. According to Umechukwu (2001), “for active participation in any developmental, social and behavioural process, communication remains the main ingredient”. Communication constitutes a powerful force in any society as it is central to knowledge, development, and existence.

Objectives

The broad objective of this study is to determine how the media in Nigeria disseminated messages concerning Covid-19 when it was reported in Nigeria. This objective was achieved by comparing headline media stories about the pandemic when it was first reported in China and when it eventually spread into our country. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the role media played during the outbreak of Covid-19 in Nigeria
2. To determine the extent of media stories on Covid-19 when it was first reported in China and when it finally spread into Nigeria.
3. To determine if media stories on Covid-19 made suggestions to the government and recommended appropriate health behaviour when it broke out in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Mass media play a significant role in all sphere of human life in our modern society. They are handy tools in every day interactions and socialisation. Mass media are print and electronic means of communication that spread messages to audiences over large areas (Campbell, 2015).The media act as watch-dog of the society and this underlies the potency of the media as instrument of socio-economic, educational, and political development. Thus, the mass media are instrumental to health behaviour change as demonstrated in the Covid-19 pandemic, innovation adoption as evident in agricultural practices, and in observation of health protocol as practiced in the mitigation of Covid-19 infections.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Responsibility Theory (SRT). Social Responsibility Theory was first articulated by the Hutchins Commission Report on Free and Responsible Press (Sambe, 2005). “The essential difference between this theory and other theories is that the media must assume the obligation of social responsibility, and if they do not, someone must see that they do”. The theory demands that the media should act responsibly by realising that they have certain obligations to the public. That is to say, the media should reflect all shades of opinions to enable the public reach rational decision. Thus, for Covid-19, the media must show a sense of duty to keep the public informed, to avoid causing panic, to provide advice on latest health and mitigation measures against the disease, and engage in environmental surveillance for the well-being of society.

Review of Related Literature

According to the World Health Organisation, (WHO, 2020), Corona-virus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by corona-

virus. It rapidly emerged as a global health threat, and on the 30th of January, 2020, was declared to be an international public health concern by WHO. Subsequently, the threat was raised to an unprecedented risk level globally. Nigeria formally joined the rest of the world on 28th February, 2020 to declare wide ranging measures such as hand washing, social distancing, reduced working hours for civil servants, work-at-home, and even total lockdowns, towards its mitigation.

A pandemic occurs when a disease that people are not immune to spreads across large regions. The Corona virus is common in certain species of animals such as cattle and camels. However, the transmission of this virus from animal to human is rare. The disease is most contagious when a person's symptoms are at their peak stage. So, it is possible for someone without symptoms to spread the virus. Droplets containing the virus can also land on nearby surfaces or objects. Other people can pick up the virus by touching these. Infection is likely to occur if the person then touches their nose, eyes or mouth. COVID-19 is more dangerous than other diseases like leprosy, AIDS, elephantiasis, stroke etc. (WHO, 2020). According to United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020), the symptoms of the virus which may appear two to fourteen days after exposure (incubation period) are; cold ,fever, cough, difficulty in breathing , body aches , headache, loss of taste or smell, and sore throat etc.

The outbreak of this virus in Nigeria made both the state and federal governments to adopt preventive measures through the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and information disseminated to the populace through the media. At the state levels, there was the use of the mass media to link the government and the citizens both in the urban and rural areas on mitigation protocols to avoid or reduce infections. Lockdown was the last resort as infection rates continued to escalate nationally and internationally. Nigerian was, however, one

of the few countries worldwide that managed to limit infection rate considerably and minimised mortality to relatively negligible numbers.

The Covid-19 Protocols were strictly adhered to by the public due to constant promotion of hand washing hygiene and other preventive measures. This declaration by WHO and the constant reportage by the media created awareness among the citizens, leading to massive buying of hand sanitizers, facemasks and daily need products . Media reports helped to push the government into manufacturing of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) kits, sanitizers and nose masks for distribution to the general public and health workers. Media also promoted personal hygiene, social distancing protocol, wearing of nose masks, e-learning, visual meetings, conferences, and reporting of the Covid-19 cases around the globe. Studies on mass media and their role in the management of health issues are growing and show that the media are effective in changing health behaviour of the masses especially during the outbreak of diseases. For example, Bowen (2013), found that media messages convinced Cameroonians to use treated net to prevent the spread of malaria. This outcome suggests a positive relationship between media health messages and healthy behaviour. Also, Uwom and Oloyede (2014), studied newspaper coverage of health issues in Nigeria and found that the media allocated much prominence to them which in turn may help the masses to take seriously the issue of health as portrayed in the media.

The lockdowns inspired people to adopt different innovations in addition to the health protocols as survival strategies. The media reinforced this by their constant coverage of the pandemic issues around the globe. There were constant, round-the-clock media portrayals of the devastating effects of the disease through reports, photographs, news, videos etc. around the world. In addition to the efforts of the traditional mass media, internet, and social media

platforms also showed status of the pandemic around the world and on almost every website. Though, there were misinformation, fake news, and outright falsehood about the guidelines and safety measures during different phases of the lockdown, curfew timings etc., the extensive coverage and publicity from different angles and regions of the world helped to reduce infection rate of the disease especially in African countries.

Methodology

The study adopts the qualitative research method in eliciting data. Lindolf (1995), opines that qualitative studies examine form, content and human behaviour rather than subject it to mathematics and other formal methods. Thus, news reports on Covid-19 innational dailies, television, and radio, were analysed to generate data for this study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria is part of the worldwide disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The disease threw the world into colonies such that isolation became a part of daily living. There were severe restrictions on movement, and socialisation. The media filled the vacuum created by these restrictions by their round-the-clock reportage of news on the pandemic. *Premium Times* reported the pandemic on 31st January, 2020, in Mainland China and other countries worldwide. The federal government of Nigeria set up a Coronavirus Preparedness Group (CPG), to mitigate the impact of the virus if it eventually spreads to the country. On the same day, the World Health Organization (WHO), listed Nigeria among 13 African countries identified as high-risk for the spread of the virus. On February 28, 2020, Nigeria was greeted with the news of the pandemic that cut across all the thirty-six States of the Federation. The first confirmed case

in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. In March, Nigeria's minister of health, Osagie Ehanire, announced that 60 persons who had contact with the index Italian patient were under isolation, 40 persons in Ogun State, and 20 in Lagos State. On 1st March, four Chinese citizens were quarantined in Plateau State. They all tested negative the following day. On 3rd March, the governor of Lagos State, Babajide Sanwo-Olu disclosed that two foreign nationals from an unnamed Asian country had tested negative to the virus. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control reported that a total of 219 primary and secondary contacts of the index case had been identified and were being actively monitored. On 9th March, President Muhammadu Buhari established a Presidential Task Force (PTF), for the control of the virus in the country. On 10th March, Turkish Airlines cancelled all their flights to Nigeria due to the virus outbreak. On 15th March, a woman in Enugu State was reported to have displayed the symptoms of the virus but tested negative the following day. On 17th March, Nigeria postponed the 20th national sports festival that was supposed to hold in Benin City, Edo State, from 22nd March to 1st April. On 18th March, the management of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), suspended the 2020 Batch A, Stream One, 21 days orientation exercise indefinitely. Later the same day, Nigeria placed a travel ban on 13 countries including Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, China, Spain, Netherlands, Norway etc. due to high cases of the virus. On 23rd March, Ebonyi State government banned all public gatherings in the state, including weddings, seminars, conferences, religious services, burials and any other large gatherings. The Chief Justice of Nigeria, Tanko Muhammad, also ordered all courts in Nigeria to shut down from 24th March. Nigeria ordered the closure of all land borders for four weeks and the suspension of Federal Executive Council, (FEC)

meetings etc. *The Punch newspaper* of 13th March 2020, reported that a Chinese citizen presented himself to the Lagos State government on suspicion of being infected with the coronavirus. He was admitted at Reddington Hospital and was released the following day after testing negative. On March 9th 2020 *Channels TV* reported the second case of the virus in Ewekoro, Ogun State of a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control also announced the same day that they had already set up coronavirus group and was ready to activate its incident system if any case emerged in Nigeria. There were 1,793 cases in April, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 1,932, out of which 56 deaths were confirmed, bringing the death toll to 58. There were 8,230 confirmed cases in May, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 10,162, with 229 deaths confirmed, bringing the death toll to 287. In July–September, 17,457 cases were reported, while confirmed cases rose to 43,151, with 289 deaths, which raised the death toll to 879. Reported cases in August increased to 10,857, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 54,008, with 134 deaths. Total death toll in August was 1,013. Also, 4,840 cases and 99 deaths were reported in September, bringing the total number of confirmed cases and deaths to 58,848 and 1,112 respectively. There were 50,358 recoveries as of 30 September, leaving 7,378 active cases.

On 27th April, 2020, the *Nation newspaper* the President as stating that with effect from 4 – 17th May, the first phase of lockdown in FCT, Lagos, and Abuja will commence. This phase also included a nationwide curfew of 8 PM to 6 AM. However, some of these measures were gradually relaxed after sometimes due to the significant drop of the cases recorded between September - November 2020. The relaxation of the lockdowns also signalled the re-opening of the economy to prevent the second phase of the lockdown. This also led to the closure of isolation centres in most

states, and the relaxed usage of face-masks in public places such as markets, public offices, event centers, restaurants, and bars. Four months after, on 2nd March, 2021, *the National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA)*, reported on that it had taken delivery of the first shipment of four million dose of Oxford–AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine from the COVAX initiative. Vaccinations began three days later on 5th March. As of 10 July 2021, 2,534,205 people have received their first dose of Covid-19 vaccine, and 1,404,740 have received their second dose.

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English describes the media as the storehouse of information, the mouth piece of the people, and the unbiased umpire in societal affairs. The media are acclaimed as the Fourth Estate of the Realm after the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary arms of government. This is because media are seen as information disseminators, opinion moulders, and watch dog of the society. Thus, much of what is published, televised, or broadcast is undoubtedly of great value and many people have been stimulated into following new interests, health behaviour change, health and social innovations, life style change, and new perspectives in life as a result of this disease. Many social and environmental issues such as Covid-19, anti-smoking campaigns, Polio immunisation, family planning, and gender mainstreaming, gained much wider audience as a result of increased publicity by the mass media. Thus, Gever and Ezeah (2020), see the media as being mandated with the fundamental role of educating, creating awareness, and informing the public during a pandemic. They argue that the most suitable way the media contribute to creating awareness and educating the masses during a pandemic is through coverage. This is implemented via regular reporting public health issues, suggesting appropriate health behaviour, and recommending policies that will help in curtailing the spread of a pandemic. The media educate the public regarding health issues so that they could be

mentally equipped regarding behaviour that leads to preventing the spread of a pandemic (Flora, Maibach, & Maccoby 1989; Hanitzsch, Peters, & Broersma., 2019).

Conclusion

The pandemic spread worldwide very fast due to rapid advancements in technology, which has turned the world into a global village. Global travelling can transform epidemics to pandemic as a result of easy social interactions within the global population. The media were instrumental in the worldwide effort to identify and implement mitigation and control measures towards the outbreak. The media did this by playing its natural role of information dissemination, education, and surveillance. It is evident that the media must be integrated as important partners in the management of public health issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic by public health authorities worldwide in order to achieve the desired result within the shortest possible time and at the least possible cost.

Recommendations

1. The role of the media during the pandemic was exemplary, responsible, and effective. The media should, therefore, be considered as important partners to public health authorities in the management of public health issues.
2. The round-the-clock reportage of the pandemic by the media in Nigeria, and globally, kept the masses focused on the pandemic and the mitigation measures effectively. The media should be helped to do even more in future by the government through the health authorities such as Ministry of Health (MOH), Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), and National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA).

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