

THE MASS MEDIA AND PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The mass media has always been saddled with informing and updating the masses on the latest development in their environment and far beyond. In times of disease outbreak like coronavirus, the mass media has it as a duty to inform and educate the masses on symptoms, prevention, and possible treatment to influence their knowledge, attitude, and practices. The new health behavior of hand washing, putting on facemasks in public places, social distancing, avoidance of crowded places, etc., were all learned due to exposure to the media. Local broadcast stations in Nigeria like Africa Magic and Radio Nigeria Enugu ran various campaigns to influence the masses' health behavior morning, afternoon, and night. These campaigns were in the form of advertorials, talk shows, phone-in programs, animations/animated short stories, etc.

Keywords: Media, public health communication, disease outbreak, pandemic, coronavirus.

INTRODUCTION

Despite high-level advancement in healthcare services, infectious diseases have remained a worrying issue for humans. This led to the emergence of health communication as an essential tool for achieving public health objectives in the 21st century (Bernhardt, 2004). In periods of health risks, the media serves as an outlet for intervening in modifying health behavior by creating awareness and mobilizing the public for prevention and corrective actions (Okorie, Oyesomi, and Olusola, 2014; Okorie and Salawu, 2016).

The place of good health in the overall development of a nation has been given priority given the recent health threats posed by the Coronavirus disease, Lassa fever, the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), and other tropical diseases. In a bid to tackle health concerns, governments worldwide have resolved to use communication-driven campaigns to reach out to the teeming populace to influence their behavior towards positive health practices.

Although prevention has historically been part of medical intervention, communicating the threat of disease to the public has not always been at the forefront of public health efforts. Federal agencies have focused on laboratory research's scientific accuracy, disease surveillance, epidemiologic studies, and their organizations' immunization efforts. As scientific studies meticulously recorded the results of public health efforts in medical journals, reaching the public directly was, for the most part, left to the press and others who translated scientific journal information for the layperson (Freimuth, Huan and Polyxeni, 2000).

Before an outbreak is recognized and an investigation begins, limited numbers of persons might be exposed to health risks without experiencing illness (Tumpey, Daigle, and Nowak, 2018). As increasing numbers of persons are exposed to the threat or become ill, healthcare providers and

others might become aware of the higher than expected number of illnesses and begin reporting the unusually high occurrences to local and state health authorities. This situation is often what prompts an outbreak investigation, and as that outbreak evolves, communications about it must evolve as well (Reynolds and Seeger, 2014; WHO, n.d)

Health Communication

There are various definitions of health communication from different perspectives. Healthy People (2010) defines health communication as the art and technique of informing, influencing, and motivating individual, institutional, and public audiences about important health issues. It further adds that the scope of health communication includes disease prevention, health promotion, health care policy, and the business of health care and enhancing the quality of life and health of individuals within the community.

Health communication has been defined as the study and use of methods to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health (Freimuth, Cole, and Kirby, 2000). Communication methods are used to create and increase public awareness of a disease; educate the public about a disease, its causes, and treatment; change a person's or group's attitudes about an illness; change individual behavior to prevent or control disease; advocate for policy changes in favor of disease prevention and control, and create social norms that favor healthful living.

Rogers (1996, p.15) defines health communication as referring to "any human communication whose content is concerned with health." It is important to note that health communication research surrounds the development of persuasive messages about health, disseminating health-related information through broadcast, print, electronic media, and the role of interpersonal relationships in health communities. At the core of this communication is the idea of health and the emphasis on fitness. The goal of health communication research is to identify and provide better and more effective communication strategies that will improve society's overall health.

According to Akinfeleye (1987), health communication basically could be described as the form of communication disseminated by the mass media for adequate health care delivery office. Office of disease prevention and health promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human services posits that health communication is the study and practice of communicating promotional health information, such as public health campaigns, health education, and between doctor and patient.

According to Definition of Wellness (2013), health communication is a crucial strategy to inform the public about health concerns and to maintain essential health issues on the public agenda. It advocates the use of mass and multimedia and other technological innovations to disseminate useful health information to the public, increase awareness of specific aspects of individual and collective health, and the importance of health development.

Concerning the scope of health communication, the National Cancer Institute (2001, p.17) submits that: health communication can increase the intended audience's knowledge and awareness of a health issue, problems, or solution; influence perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that



may change social norms; prompt action; demonstrate or illustrate healthy skills, reinforce knowledge, attitudes, or behavior; show the benefit of behavior change; advocate a position on a health issue or policy; increase demand or support for health services, refute myths and misconceptions and strengthen organization relationships.

Health communication is a key and necessary factor in saving lives during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Accurate and well-developed health communication can facilitate how societies handle uncertainty and fear, promote and accomplish adherence to necessary behavior change, and meet individuals' fear, and foster hope in the face of a crisis. Professionals in health communication, patient education, and health behavior change have a special responsibility to contribute to the spread of concise and valid information in different contexts (Finset, Bosworth, Butow, Gulbrandsen, Hulsman, Pieterse, Street, Tshoetschel and Van Weert, 2020).

Therefore, health communication is the art of informing the audience of the outbreak of disease and educating them on the symptoms, prevention, and treatment through the mass media.

Mass Media and Health Communication

Mass media are intensively employed in public health. Vast sums are spent annually for materials and salaries that have gone into the production and distribution of booklets, pamphlets, exhibits, newspaper articles, and radio and television programs. These media are employed at all levels of public health, hoping that three effects might occur: the learning of correct health information, the changing of health attitudes and values. And the establishment of new health behavior (Griffiths and Knutson, n.d).

Mass media campaigns have long been a tool for promoting public health (Noar, 2006), widely used to expose high proportions of large populations to messages through routine uses of existing media, such as television, radio, and newspapers. Communication campaigns involving diverse topics and target audiences have been conducted for decades. Some reasons why information campaigns fail' is an early landmark in the literature. Therefore, exposure to such messages is generally passive (Wakefield, Loken, and Hornik, 2010). Such campaigns are frequently competing with factors, such as pervasive product marketing, powerful social norms, and behaviors driven by addiction or habit (Catalán-Matamoros, 2011).

The mass media helps health workers expand their audience reach, which is crucial considering that face-to-face communication channels often require too many human resources and reach only a small number of people in large, underserved rural areas. The mass media provides an essential link between rural residents and vital health information.

In the form of the radio and television, the mass media are an effective way to persuade target audiences to adopt new behaviors or remind them of critical information. Besides informing the public about new diseases and where to seek help, they can also keep the public updated about immunization campaigns. The mass media can "empower rural populations to fight significant causes of infant mortality such as diarrheal dehydration and diseases which can be prevented through vaccination, inform large numbers of people of seasonal or daily variations for such activities as an immunization campaign or availability of a new product or service, teach new



health skills such as how to mix oral rehydration solution, promote new health behaviors such as taking ivermectin once a year, motivate ad hoc or organized listening groups, and increase community acceptance of health workers (Boyd and Shaw, 1995).

It has been well established that the media play a crucial role in framing public health debates and shaping public perceptions by selecting which issues are reported and how they are represented (Seale, 2002). In public health debates, the media contribute to framing health problems, their drivers, and potential solutions, with stakeholders variously positioned across those debates (Elliot-Green, Hyseni, Lloyd-Williams, Bromley, and Capewell, 2016).

Mass media remain a crucial component and veritable tool in the campaign toward sustainable health development in Nigeria. This is so because through adequate health communication and campaigns on health issues such as drug abuse, vaccines/immunizations, maternal health care, family planning programs, healthful living practices, prevention practices, cure eradication of diseases, etc. The mass media have proven to be very concerned about our health development (Odorume, 2015).

Mass Media Campaigns against Disease Outbreak

Scholars agree that media awareness campaigns should be seen as the cornerstone for health communication interventions. This is because of the myriad of communication techniques and channels that could be used to increase awareness and knowledge of health problems and interventions (Kreps & Sivaram, 2009; DeJong, 2010; Obono, 2011). Day (2011) opines that media awareness campaigns "are varied, multifaceted, highly planned and strategically assembled media symphonies designed to increase awareness, inform, or change behavior in target audiences" (p.79). Thus, media awareness campaigns are planned communication techniques designed to suit target groups to tackle diseases and health challenges that negatively affect individuals in society. Interestingly, DeJong (2010) argues that media awareness campaigns are also known as information campaigns used to raise awareness of health problems, usually motivating people to avoid the issues.

Mass media campaigns have been a critical component of health promotion for a long time, particularly where behavior change is desired. Since the mid-1980s, mass media has been used as a primary intervention to prevent HIV through increasing awareness and knowledge about HIV transmission, adoption of safer socio-sexual behaviors, and promotion of early utilization of health care services such as HIV counseling and testing (HTC) and antiretroviral therapy (ART)1-4.

Mass media campaigns can be used to provide information on current and effective vaccination, drug therapy, and social distancing measures (Collinson, Khan, and Heffernan, 2015). Public health education campaigns that include informative literature (i.e., pamphlets), posters, newspaper articles and advertisements, radio and television messages, and social media outlets (i.e., Twitter, Facebook) are used daily inform the public on current health issues. Mass media outlets can aid in the dissemination of this information. Studies of mass media campaigns and healthy behavior have reported that mass media campaigns can elicit positive behavior change and even prevent negative behavior change in individuals (Hornik, 2002; Lau, Yang, Tsui, and Kim,

2003). Therefore, it is concluded that mass media campaigns should inform the public so that behavior change can result (Majumder, Kluberg, Santillana, Mekaru, and Brownstein, 2014).

The mass media can play a positive role in combating the Coronavirus pandemic and its attendant fatality in Nigeria, Africa, and the world. The mass media encompasses print and non-print methods of disseminating information (including magazines, newspapers, radio, and television) to many people. One of the advantages of the mass media in health promotion activities and health intervention is that it can reach very high numbers of people to engage in health behavior changes.

Africa Magic channels have been running a campaign targeted at changing and influencing people's attitudes towards the coronavirus through information. The campaign is in Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Pidgin English, and English languages. Radio Nigeria Enugu have also been running their campaign every morning between 6-6:30 am daily in Pidgin English targeted at those without education. These advertorials contain vital information such as symptoms of COVID-19, modes of transmission, ways of prevention, possible effects on the society at large, etc.

The Role of Journalism in the Pandemic

COVID-19 will be an all-consuming story for the next few months. It will require access to expertise and an understanding of complex disciplines such as epidemiology and global health. It will also demand a considerable amount of resources from newsrooms that were already overstretched (Suarez, 2020). Journalists have an essential role in filling information gaps and counter misinformation and disinformation about the spread of disease.

Journalists across the globe face unprecedented challenges to report the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak accurately and safely. The fast-moving story presents newsrooms with a once-in-a-generation test to interpret the scientific data, tell the human stories, and hold political leaders accountable (Loane, 2020).

As the pandemic has developed, the need to provide clear, honest, and valid information to the public all over the world has become apparent, as expressed in a February editorial in the *Lancet*, concluding that "There may be no way to prevent a COVID-19 pandemic in this globalized time, but verified information is the most effective prevention against the disease of panic" (*Lancet*). While the threat of COVID-19 has triggered a severe global health concern, a great deal of the fear surrounding the disease is being fueled by widespread misinformation (Ntonjira, 2020). We live in a world of exciting parallels where we have access to more information than any previous generation. Still, at the same time, we're plagued by fake news and misinformation.

Separating truth from outright falsehoods can be a daunting task, especially in the era of social media, and what the World Health Organization (WHO) has termed the world's first infodemic – "an overabundance of information — some accurate and some not — that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it." To inform the public during these uncertain times, newsrooms across the country have made pandemic coverage a priority. But the ever-changing and sometimes unverified nature of COVID-19 data

being released has left journalists and researchers with challenges in providing accurate information to the public (Natividad, 2020).

Corona Virus and Disease Outbreak

Endemic - describes a disease that is present permanently in a region or population.

An epidemic - is an outbreak that affects many people at one time and can spread through one or several communities.

Pandemic - is the term used to describe an epidemic when the spread is global.

Therefore, COVID-19 is a pandemic.

The 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing global pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The outbreak first emerged in Wuhan, Hubei, China in December 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. As of March 14, over 155,000 cases have been reported in around 130 countries and territories; more than 5,800 people have died, and over 74,000 have recovered. Regions affected by major outbreaks include mainland China, South Korea, Iran, Italy, and Spain. On March 13, 2020, the WHO declared Europe as the epicenter of the pandemic.

The WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020. By yesterday (March 26), the World Health Organization (WHO) situation report showed that the disease had killed 20,834 people worldwide and infected 449,219 in 200 countries and territories, causing fear and panic around the world.

The virus primarily spreads between people in a way similar to influenza, via respiratory droplets from coughing. The time between exposure and symptoms onset is typically five days but may range from two to fourteen days. Symptoms are most often fever, dry cough, and shortness of breath. Complications may include pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome. There is currently no vaccine or specific antiviral treatment, but research is ongoing. Efforts are aimed at managing symptoms and supportive therapy. Recommended preventive measures include handwashing, maintaining distance from other people (particularly those who are unwell), and monitoring and self-isolation for fourteen days for people who suspect they are infected.

Public health responses have included travel restrictions, quarantines, curfews, event cancellations, and facility closures. These include quarantine of the Chinese province of Hubei, the nationwide quarantine of Italy, the national quarantine of Spain, curfew measures in China and South Korea, various border closures or incoming passenger restrictions, screening methods at airports and train stations, and travel advisories regarding regions with community spread. Schools and universities have closed either on a nationwide or local basis in at least 61 countries, affecting more than 421 million students.



Effects of the pandemic include social and economic instability, xenophobia and racism against people of Chinese and East Asian descent, and the online spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories about the virus

The first confirmed case of the pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 in Nigeria was announced on February 27, 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus caused by SARS-CoV-2. On March 9, 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State; a Nigerian citizen contacted the Italian citizen. On January 28, 2020, the Federal Government assured citizens of the country of its readiness to strengthen surveillance at five intentional airports to prevent the spread of coronavirus. The government announced the airports as Enugu, Lagos, Rivers, Kano, and the FCT. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control also told the same day that they had already set up the coronavirus group and was ready to activate its incident system if any case emerged in Nigeria.

Theoretical Underpinning

This article is anchored on the Attitude Change theory. The theory specifies that there are essentially two routes to attitude and opinion change. The first is to alter the belief or value of premises through various communication inputs. The second is to place individuals in a situation where, as a result of their behavior, they are likely on their own to question the premises on which their attitudes and opinions were based. The second method of attitude change is what is sometimes called self-persuasion. Some scholars believe that media campaign managers should be familiar with and apply opinion and attitude change theory as a communication approach because child labor campaigns involve attitude and behavioral changes. Leading theorists like Fishbein and Ajzen since 1975 observed a need for media campaign planners to put the people first in any organized program to change their attitudes or win their support for campaign programs.

Supporting this position, Nwosu (1991) observes that in trying to change people's attitudes and opinions, we can adapt the techniques of even challenging some of their "unhealthy" beliefs and values. The state of imbalance brought on by the challenge may predispose them to change their opinion and attitudes in the direction we desire. In all, this theory's application to the study is that attitude or change in behavior is predicated on a person's intent to participate in a specified behavior that is friendly with the society. It points to responsible social behavior, which means actions taken by an individual or a group of individuals to do what is right to protect the community.

CONCLUSION

Through talk shows, phone-in programme, advertorials, animation, still images, expert opinions, etc., the media provide vital information to the audience and persuade them towards attitude change. Even the campaigners against the spread of the virus have taken to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc., to reach mostly the youths.



While health workers work day and night to ensure the eradication of coronavirus, or at least to reduce it, and media workers as well work tirelessly to ensure that information regarding the modes of transmission and ways of prevention get to everybody in the country; citizens should try and observe all the rules like social/physical distancing, wearing of nose/face masks in public places, washing of hands with running water and soap, the use of hand sanitizers, etc.

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