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COVID- 19 Pandemic and Audience Perception of News Dissemination Credibility in Abeokuta Metropolis

ADELABU OMOWALE & KAZEEM A OYEDEJI,

Mass Communication Department, Redeemer's University, Ede Osun State. adelabuo@run.edu.ng.Digital Multi Media Center, Federal Polytechnic, Ede Osun State sharpenedneedle231@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined audience perception of COVID-19 news dissemination credibility in Abeokuta metropolis. The study was initiated to investigate how the people of Abeokuta react to the news on COVID-19, the medium that is most relied on for news on COVID-19 by them and the extent to which the news on COVID-19 has influenced the attitudes of the people of Abeokuta. A survey design was adopted in which convenient random sampling technique was used to draw a sample of 120 residents of Abeokuta Metropolis. The questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection. The findings of the study showed that the audience perceived that the news dissemination on COVID-19 is authentic; a majority of them chose the Internet to be the most reliable source of information on COVID-19 and that news on COVID -19 has influenced the attitude of the audience positively. The study concluded that events of public concern such as health issues definitely attract media attention in many forms. The study therefore recommended that media outlets and journalists should adhere to the highest ethical standards when reporting on COVID-19 and should report accurately and without bias.

Keywords: News Dissemination, COVID-19, Audience Perception, Credibility

Introduction

The novel coronavirus is a pandemic of the coronavirus family that is currently ravaging the whole world. It is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans (WHO, 2020). It was first identified in Wuhan, capital of Hubei Province of China in December, 2019. It was initially from animal sources; however, it has subsequently spread between people (Zhang, 2020).An early genetic analysis of the outbreak revealed that the virus was similar to, but distinct from, SARS-CoV, but the closest genetic similarity was found in a coronavirus that had been isolated from bats (Lu et al., 2020; Heymann,& Shindo, 2020). However, scholars have come to the understanding that coronaviruses are zoonotic viruses responsible for mild respiratory tract infections and fatal pneumonia in humans (Su et al., 2016). Human coronaviruses (HCoV) were first identified in the 1960s in the noses of patients with common cold (Felman, & White, 2020). The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) identified seven coronaviruses that can affect people as: 229E (alpha coronavirus), NL63 (alpha coronavirus), OC43 (beta coronavirus), HKU1 (beta coronavirus), MERS-CoV (the beta coronavirus that causes Middle East respiratory syndrome), SARS-CoV (the beta coronavirus that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome) and SARS-CoV-2 (the novel coronavirus that causes coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19).

The symptoms of the novel coronavirus have been variously described to include: fever, cough, shortness of breath, and diarrhea (CDC, 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Hessen, 2020). But cases of severe infection can result in pneumonia, kidney failure and death (WHO, 2020; Hui et al., 2019). The novel coronavirus is thought to have been transmitted from animals to humans. However, the genetic epidemiology suggests that from the beginning of December, 2019, when the first cases were retrospectively traced to Wuhan, the spread of infection has been almost entirely driven by human-to-human transmission, not the continued spillover. According to Mackenzie and Smith (2020), this human-to-human transmission of the virus is

primarily thought to occur through close contacts with infected persons' respiratory droplets usually generated by sneezing and coughing. To keep the public informed, the media just like healthcare officers have been working hard to ensure that COVID-19 is combated. Journalists have also been on the frontline reporting the cases, the death toll and the measures the masses should take to avoid contracting the virus. From informing the people about the pandemic, the media also strives to shape public opinion about the spread and the precautionary measures that can help to mitigate it (flatten the curve). Extant literature reveals that some scientific, laboratory and epidemiological studies have been carried out on the outbreak (Chu et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Given the novel nature of the virus, more related research is expected in the coming months/years.

The media play crucial roles in shaping public opinion and perception of issues such as the outbreak of the virus. The way the media frame the pandemic will determine how the public responds to it, and whether they will take a precautionary measure or not. Although research focus has been on the outbreak of the pandemic, there is no known empirical study that has focused essentially on the media coverage/framing of the outbreak and how this influences audience perception and response; hence, this is a gap that this study attempts to fill. Also, the fact that no empirical study on media framing of the novel coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria was found in the available literature underscores the need to fill the identified gap.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that there is a serious concern about misinformation on the Internet, online audiences are increasing, and when people are using online media, they must place some reliance on it. Therefore the credibility of online and traditional media is becoming an increasingly important topic to understand in the field of communication, and various studies in different countries have reported different results about Internet credibility – in regard to the coronavirus that is ravaging the world currently. The "news dissemination credibility" phenomenon might not be a new one, but it has definitely been of interest to researchers in the past few years. In this regard, this paper examines audience perception of news dissemination credibility in the country in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do the people of Abeokuta react to the news on COVID-19?
2. Which medium was most relied on for news on COVID-19 by the people of Abeokuta?
3. To what extent does the news on COVID-19 influence attitudinal change in the people of Abeokuta?

Literature Review

An evaluation of news credibility

Audience members seek information for various purposes, especially for comfort, empowerment, learning, and knowledge to act. But all information is not useful and credible to them. Thus, they filter out useless information and retain only that which is useful and believable. Credibility is one of the criteria used to filter unbelievable information (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Credibility is defined as "judgments made by a perceiver (e.g., a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator" (O'Keefe, 1990, pp. 130-131). But others believe that this definition should also include institutions as well as persons as communicators (Gass & Seiter, 2007). In general, the scholarly examination of credibility is perhaps among the oldest lines in communication research, originating from the ancient Greeks (Griffin, 2009; Liu, 2003). On the other hand, Garrison (2003) reminds us that the investigation of perceived credibility and components of audience attitudes has begun as new mass communication technologies have appeared.

Usually, credible information is referred to as believable information (Fogg et al., 2001; Tseng & Fogg, 1999), and it is a person's perception of the truth of a piece of information (Eisend, 2006). Self

(1996) also states that this concept evoke Aristotle's argument that persuasion is based upon fitting the message to audience need in the linear model of speaker-message-audience. In sum, different researchers, in fact, have employed different definitions of credibility. These definitions help to demonstrate that credibility is a complex, interdependent, and multidimensional concept (Burgoon, Burgoon, & Wilkinson, 1981). During the 1950s, competition from television provoked the industry to look at the various news media credibility in the eyes of the public. The reliance on TV climbed so steadily during the 1960s that by 1968 television news had attained confidence from twice as many people as the newspapers (Erskine, 1970; Self, 1996). In today's media environment, advent of the Internet as a new and widely used medium for the delivery of information raises the question of how to assess the credibility of this medium (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). So, the focus of media credibility research is now more about medium effects such as differences between newspapers, television and online media (Newhagen & Nass, 1989).

Media credibility, due to the deep penetration of the Internet, has received renewed attention in recent years (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). However, interest in newspaper credibility may have reached the highest point in the late 1980s, but the media credibility issue has recently been revived with the involvement of traditional media (for example, television and newspapers) in the Internet (Garrison, 2003). In sum, recent studies mostly focus on examining the credibility of the Internet with traditional media counterparts. For example, the result of a study on "Perceptions of Internet information credibility", conducted by Flanagin and Metzger (2000), shows that the Internet information was as credible as television. Flanagin and Metzger (2000) also concluded that credibility among different types of information sought by audience members, such as news and entertainment, varied by media channels. Respondents reported that they did not verify Internet-based information. However, this finding varied by the type of information needed. The level of experience in using the Internet and how an audience perceived the information were related with whether they verified the information found on the Internet.

However, the relationship between media use and perceived media credibility has been investigated for several decades but the findings of a study conducted by Rimmer and Weaver (1987) indicate that the rate of media use needs to be clearly distinguished from level of preference for various media. They also note that the Roper-type questions that ask which medium people choose for different news or where people habitually obtain the majority of their news are not a proper question to determine frequency of media use. Studies of media use have consistently shown that online media are a complement to traditional media more complementary than competitive media (Bucy, 2003). Based on this finding that online media are as a complement to traditional media, it can be deduced that credibility is something a medium cannot earn on its own but it also should be obtained by other media.

Misinformation as a phenomenon

"Misinformation" is defined in several ways. According to Scheufele and Krause (2019), misinformation is incorrect information, the probable outcome of an accident. On the other hand, Wardle and Derakhshan (2020) note that false information which is being shared unconsciously (not knowing that the information is correct or not) and without any purpose to make harm to anyone is called misinformation; on the other side, disinformation is false information shared consciously to make harm intentionally (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2020). Additionally, the authors have also defined mal-information, which is authentic private information shared with the public to cause harm by creating hate speech and harassment. Further, in a more specific manner, Chou et al. (2018) define health misinformation as "health-related claims of fact that is currently false due to a lack of scientific evidence".

For this study purposes, however, "misinformation" has been considered as a

"mother-term" of both (mis and dis);

i. Inaccurate information shared unconsciously by believing that the information is true, and
ii. Inaccurate information shared consciously.

Hence, in its place, considering the study of Krause et al. (2020), we conceived that the misinformation is false information that can be challenged with the best-available evidence pertaining to the COVID-19. Therefore, the current study considered 'misinformation' as an 'umbrella term' of general misinformation belief, conspiracy belief, and religious misinformation belief.

Mass media and coronavirus

Events of public concern such as health issues definitely attract media attention. This can take the form of print, electronic, Internet or social media attention; in most cases, a combination of all. Whichever form it takes, what matters most is the level or impact of media intervention in health crisis, especially disease outbreak. Mass media cannot cure virus but can cure its spread (Adelakun, 2016). This statement explicitly underscores the role of mass media in health reporting, especially in curbing the spread of infectious disease outbreak. Scholars have argued that the mass media have the potential to influence health-related behaviors and perceptions (Leask et al., 2010). In Nigeria, the mass media are used independently or complementarily in health promotion activities to achieve positive lifestyle changes (Wogu et al., (2020). Therefore, the role of mass media in health promotion and intervention goes beyond just creating awareness on a particular health issue or disease outbreak; it also entails placing emphasis on the angle or direction of reportage of such issue or outbreak. These media angles of presenting health issues take the form of media framing to influence public perception and induce attitudinal response, leading to positive behavioral changes.

Reminiscing to the period that the coronavirus became a pandemic, ravaging the world and its economy, it would be recalled that the media has been on the frontline of action in discussing the pandemic, engaging in an awareness campaign to the general public and educating them on the laid down precautions to be adhered to - in line with public health. Extant empirical studies consulted have shown that every media organization has made it a point of duty to come up with a developmental news on the disease, hence providing a platform where discussions are made on the disease explicitly and providing accurate information as regards the update provided by the ministry incharge of the disease control in the country and the world at large.

However, a research made by Adelakun (2017) shows that what always raises dust regarding media roles in health issues is the degree of success or failure recorded by mass media in a particular health outbreak or health challenge compared to the risks. Stressing this, Tabbaa (2010) asserts that good communication through the media is pertinent when an outbreak is unique in public health with confusion and a sense of urgency as the media in no small measure work along with health professionals in creating awareness. Placing priority on novel diseases can be useful because rare and dramatic occurrences are sometimes sentinel events (McCloskey,& Heymann, 2020). Therefore, working with the journalists and the media to help them understand the science and epidemiology, particularly in a fast and moving event, will improve risk communication to the public and reduce inappropriate concerns and panic (McCloskey,& Heymann, 2020).

However, previous studies on media reportage of heath crises reveal that even though there exists sufficient scholarly discourse on media reportage of previous disease outbreaks such as Zika virus, influenza, flu, Ebola, and Lassa fever, (Adelakun, & Adnan, 2016; Leask, Hooker,& King, 2010; Wogu et al., 2020; Adelakun, 2017, Smith, S., &Smith, S. 2016; Smith, S., Smith, S., &Adedeji, 2017; Ophir, 2018), no empirical study on media framing of the current coronavirus outbreak was found. The need to fill this lacuna in the existing literature of media reportage of health crises necessitated this present study.

Media news dissemination credibility

Media credibility is a complex and multi-

dimensional concept; research in media credibility has mostly been either on source credibility or on the credibility of the medium. Golan (2010) explains each clearly stating that research on source credibility focuses on the characteristics of the message (speaker, organization, media outlet) while that on medium credibility focuses on the medium of the message delivered (newspaper, television). Early interpretations of credibility define it as the believability of a source, and mostly depends on perceptions of the trustworthiness and expertise of the source as understood by the receiver (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). This definition steers research on credibility in psychology and communication, which largely focuses on source credibility, usually conceptualized as the believability of a speaker. However, researchers suggest that credibility of media messages may be influenced by non-source aspects, such as the medium or structure of the messages themselves (Appleman & Sundar, 2016).

Separating message credibility from the source and the medium can enhance the clarity and quality of research in a number of theoretical and practical ways (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). This study uses the definition proposed by Appelman and Sundar (2016), who define it in the context of news obtained from the media as an individual's judgment of the "veracity" of the content of communication. In this modern era, news is readily available online and media conglomerates are no longer the main source of news. In the past few decades, the online digital 'alternative' media has shifted from being supplementary sources of news to the traditional newspapers and television to becoming the main source of information (Wilson, Leong, Nge, & Hong, 2011). Researchers report that newspapers, books and television verify their news before publicizing; however, in the Internet this is not necessarily true. Online information providers are not bound by editorial and gatekeeping regulations like in the traditional media (Wilson, Leong, Nge, & Hong, 2011). Therefore, with the influx of information online and offline, the issue of message credibility is crucial.

Previous studies on media credibility are abundant but studies on message credibility specifically are scarce. Studies on message credibility and fake news are even fewer. Morris et al. (2012) investigate the user perception of tweet credibility and identify features that impact user assessment of tweet credibility. Bidin and Mustafa (2012) present findings related to youth's perception of the credibility of blogs. Karlsson, Clerwall, and Bord (2014) research the effects of transparency on source and message credibility.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical basis of this research is the theory of Media Dependency.

Media Dependency Theory

Media Dependency is proposed in 1976 by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur. The Media dependency theory explains the essential relationship between the audiences, media and the larger social system (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). They argue that individuals use the media to satisfy certain goals, the more the media functions to satisfy these goals, the more dependent the individuals are on the media. This is similar to the Uses and Gratification Theory (Wok & Wan Mohd Ghazali, 2011). According to Wok and Wan Mohd Ghazali (2011), the audience level of dependency depends on the frequency (the time that a person spends using the traditional or the social media), the importance of the message received from the specific media used and the degree of change and conflict present in the society. The theory further argues that individuals' use of the media not only depends on internal factors, such as the extent to which the media meet a number of his/her needs, but also to external factors that may not be in the individual's control. These outside factors act as constraints on what and how media can be used and on the availability of other non-media alternatives (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The more alternatives that people have for satisfying their needs, the less dependent they become on any single medium. This means individuals may sometimes depend more on a certain medium only because of its availability.The social media has become a powerful communication tool with its great ability

to supply extensive information to the masses but it also increases risks and crises (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). Regardless of the audience's education level, age, gender or religion, people are becoming increasingly dependent on the social media by trusting its messages and using it to understand the social phenomenon, to act meaningfully and effectively in the society and even for fantasy and escape without considering the credibility of its message (Wok & Wan Mohd Ghazali, 2011). However, there are some who are not influenced by the social media, and tend to depend on the traditional media for information. The media tend to affect the audience with higher needs more than the ones with minimal needs. University students are found to be the most dependent on the social media (Hamid, Ishak, Ismail, & Yazam, 2013) than the traditional media for many reasons: the cost of some traditional media, all messages on the traditional media can be easily accessed in the social media, and also for educational purposes (Hamid, Ishak, Ismail, & Yazam, 2013).

Studies have shown that university students are found to be the most dependent on the social media than the traditional media for many reasons: the cost of some traditional media, all messages on the traditional media can be easily accessed in the social media, and also for educational purposes. In relation to the paper, the theory has showed that people tend to cleave more to the traditional media – radio and television – in listening and watching.

Methodology

A simple survey method was adopted in collecting data from one hundred and twenty (120) residents in Abeokuta metropolis. In gathering the data, convenience sampling method was used in selecting respondents. In this, questionnaire was individually administered on the respondents via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Respondents were beforehand screened and their residence of Abeokuta well known. The instrument of the study was subjected to validation through a pilot study. Pilot study helped test the appropriateness of the questionnaire items before it was administered on the study sample. In this case, people of Abeokuta metropolis were used for a pre-testing of the instrument. The responses to the questionnaire items were tallied and presented in frequency tables based on the research questions.

Out of the 120 copies of the questionnaire distributed for this study, the whole copies were validly filled and retrieved from the respondents. This represents 100% return rate. Hence, the data analysis of the research was done with the validly returned instruments. The data were presented and analyzed using frequency counts, tables and percentages for easy understanding.

Table 1: What is your perception of news dissemination on COVID-19?

Option	Frequency	Percentage%
The news is authentic.	45	37.5
The news dissemination does not contain facts.	35	29.17
The news has been manipulated.	40	33.33
Total	120	100

Source: Field Survey, 2020

This table showed respondents' response on their perception of news dissemination on COVID-19. 37.5% of the respondents made it known that the news is authentic; 29.17% of them made it known that the news dissemination does not contain facts while the remaining 33.33% of them made it known that the news has been manipulated. Thus, the people perceived that the news dissemination on covid-19 is authentic.

This table below revealed the respondents' responses on the medium that the people of Abeokuta believe is the most reliable on COVID-19 as media choice. 25.0% of the respondents revealed that the medium they believe is the most reliable is radio; 20.83% of them chose television; also, 16.67% of them chose newspaper; 29.17% of them chose Internet; 2.5% of them chose pamphlet, while the remaining 5.83% of them chose others. This analysis has revealed that the majority of the people

chose Internet to be the most reliable news medium on covid-19.

Table 2: Which medium do you believe is the most reliable on COVID-19 news – as regards media choice?

Option	Frequency	Percentage%
Radio	30	25.0
Television	25	20.83
Newspaper	20	16.67
Internet	35	29.17
Pamphlet	3	2.5
Others	7	5.83
Total	120	100

Source: Field Survey, 2020

Table 3: In what way has the COVID-19 news changed the attitude of the people?

Option	Frequency	Percentage%
Positively	48	40.0
Negatively	31	25.83
Indifference	41	34.17
Total	120	100

Source: Field Survey, 2020

This analysis has revealed the ways in which people's attitude has been changed based on the news they listened to about COVID-19. 40.0% of the respondents claimed that news on covid-19 has changed the people's attitude positively; also, 25.83% of them made it known that the news has changed their attitude negatively while the remaining 34.17% of them made it known that they are indifferent to the news. Hence, the majority of the people's attitude has changed positively as a result of the news on covid-19.

Discussion of Findings

Data collected and sampled from various respondents have shown that people perceived that the news dissemination on covid-19 is authentic. Also, a majority of the people of Abeokuta chose Internet to be the most used means of sourcing COVID-19 related information. This cannot be untrue seeing that most people have gone digital, using various social media platforms and channels among others. The choice of Internet, however, is closely followed by radio, the most common mass medium of communication across the globe, after the most recent Internet technology revolution. Lastly, the analysis has proved that the attitude of a majority of the people has changed positively through exposure to news especially on managing the virus and adhering to some of the preventive measures advocated by authorities.

Conclusion

This paper has examined covid-19 pandemic and audience perception of news dissemination credibility in the country. This study has done justice to misinformation and message credibility. It has been observed that events of public concern such as health issues definitely attract media attention – which can take the form of print, electronic, Internet or social media attention; in most cases, a combination of all. However, whichever form it takes, what matters most is the level or impact of media intervention in health crisis, especially disease outbreak. Hence, mass media cannot cure virus but can cure its spread. Also, the mass media provides a platform in which journalists, public relations professionals, advertising practitioners, politicians and issues advocates as well as many others try to educate, inform, pursue and influence audiences. The success of these endeavours depends largely on how much credibility is accorded to these institutions by audiences.

Recommendations

Some recommendations were derived from this study:

1. Media outlets and journalists should adhere to the highest ethical standards, including equality principles, when reporting on COVID-19. They should report about COVID-19 accurately and without bias, avoiding stereotyping, and without unnecessarily referring to race or

nationality or ethnic origin.

2. Media outlets and journalists should support effective systems of self-regulation, including both national press complaint bodies and ombudsmen or public editors at individual news outlets. Such bodies or officials should help to ensure the right of correction or reply to address inaccurate or discriminatory reporting in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak.
3. Also, social media companies should articulate clear and easily understood policies governing misinformation and 'hate speech' on their platforms in line with the 'human rights by default' approach advocated for by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression. Many companies have refined their content moderation policies in recent years by providing more precise definitions and examples of violating content. They should continue this process, providing further clarity. Moreover, to the extent that social media companies develop policies specific to the COVID-19 outbreak, these policies should likewise be precise and nuanced in line with the standard of legality set out in international human rights law.
4. Finally, social media platforms should leverage partnerships to combat 'hate speech' and misinformation around COVID-19. They should maintain and deepen their engagement with the World Health Organization and health ministries around the world to promote the dissemination of accurate information concerning the virus. Partnerships with third-party fact-checkers are also promising. However, companies should ensure that these types of engagements are carried out in line with international human rights standards.

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