ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Leveraging Local Broadcast Stations in Campaigning against the Spread of Coronavirus in Anambra State: The Case of Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS)

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Abstract

This study examined the strategic advantage and capacity to disseminate effective and reliable information which local broadcast stations offer the society in the face of the rampaging COVID-19 pandemic. The thrust of the study is to highlight the fact that the people need not only verifiable sources of information about Coronavirus but also should rely absolutely on the information from the local media sources without being apprehensive. The paper adopted the library research approach in which relevant conceptual literature and empirical studies were analysed to ascertain the primacy of using local broadcast stations in the campaign against the spread of COVID-19. It concludes among others that local broadcast stations are more reliable with information about the cascading Coronavirus in the world today. Also, the Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) has effectively and reliably carried out its social responsibility and agenda-setting functions in the campaign against the spread of Coronavirus in Anambra State. The paper recommends, among others, that people should seek information about the deadly Coronavirus mainly from local stations rather than relying on unwholesome information from various social media platforms without filter and fact-checking.

Keywords: Leveraging, Local broadcast stations, Creating awareness, Spread of Coronavirus, Anambra Broadcasting Service.

Introduction

Most times when people are grapping for as much information as they can get during a crisis or pandemic period, the public is more often than not susceptible to false and sometimes hazardous claims, which are then passed on to others (Kushner, 2020). In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, various media platforms allow for information to be readily shared; the veracity, authenticity and reliability of such messages notwithstanding. For this reason, social media platforms provide access and opportunity to spread misinformation and rumours easily. However, this is not so with traditional news outlets or local broadcast stations, where there is filter and fact-checking of information, which is often devoid of bias.

The foregoing underscores the fact that conventional media platforms or traditional news outlets (local broadcast stations) remain very crucial sources of information in a period of pandemic. The frightening situation of the Coronavirus cascading all over the world and the manner social media are churning out all manner of information (misinformation, disinformation, memes, innuendos, half truths, lies, etc.) about its cure and prevention is creating a situation of uncertainty. More disturbing is the fact that none of the claims in social media platforms regarding the recipes or solutions for the cure or prevention of COVID-19 has been approved or certified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) or Centre for Disease Control (CDC) (Adelana, 2020).

It becomes pertinent to note that, in spite of their ubiquitous nature and ability to provide breaking news from far and near, social media are still deficient vis-à-vis the level of confidence the audience confer on local stations. This is true given the fact that information disseminated by local broadcast stations can be verified in terms of their contents through personal contacts, and phone calls among others. More so, local broadcast stations are entrenched on social responsibility function of the mediaand as well hinge their operations on laws and ethics of the journalism profession. Source

credibility in essence resonates with local broadcast stations' use in information dissemination.

In Nigeria, local broadcast stations are media platforms that have physical presence and locations that operate within the ambit of the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) laws in the country as concerning media operations. Local broadcast stations as news outlets are not faceless. Unlike social media platforms, local broadcast stations employ trained and responsible journalists who are guided by laws and ethics of the profession. Local broadcast stations in the context of this study include radio and television stations(privately or publicly owned), located in any part of the country. Local broadcast stations' campaigns are widely used to expose high proportions of large populations to messages through routine uses of existing media, such as radio and television (Ezebuenyi et al., 2020).

Local broadcast media stations are used for creating awareness about health issues. It is particularly appreciated for its strength in enhancing issues of development, which include health issues (Ugande, 2008). Speaking in favour of local broadcast stations such as radio, Soola (2002, p. 22) contends that on a global scale, but particularly in developing countries, radio as a medium of communication has been a most potent communication innovation. Its monumental success in enlightenment projects in several developing countries is an eloquent testimony to its potential.

Local broadcast media stations such as the Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) consist of both radio and television stations. The two stations have been deployed in carrying out health campaigns. Moemeka (1989, p.53) also holds that radio broadcasting is the most popular mass medium. The villagers depend so much on it as the bearer of news and instructions. It is particularly very useful in mobilization, sensitization and mass enlightenment. Based on some empirically determined factors, broadcast media (especially radio)have the efficacy of reach and immediacy, are potable and cheap,and beat literacy barriers as there is no need to be able to read and write before you can listen and understand broadcast programmes. Message contents can be delivered in native languages; they have personal touch, which lends urgency of change since messages delivered by known and respected individuals in the society have the tendency of being accepted easily (Ojebode, 2002; Ojebode, 2003; Ojebuyi, 2012; Sambe, 2005; Mwakawogo, 2006; Uwakwe, 2010).

Broadcast programmes are packaged for target audience with the aim to enlighten, inform, mobilize, integrate, stimulate and even to change their behaviour over a certain perceived concept. According to Owuamalam (2007, p.37), every programme is designed to achieve a specific purpose. It is the purpose that makes the programme significant as a communication experience. Since the inception of Coronavirus awareness campaigns, various local broadcast stations have been involved in one campaign or the other, to drum it to the ears of the populace on the need to adopt best practices to stem the spread of Coronavirus. This study focuses on the strategic advantage and capacity to disseminate effective and reliable information which local broadcast stations offer the society in the face of the rampaging COVID-19 pandemic.

Problem Statement

In the face of COVID-19 pandemic, **s**ome individuals use social media platforms (e.g. Whatsapp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) to spread fear, project fake news concerning the source of the virus, promote prejudice against China, incite panic buying, proffer fake cures and undermine medical advice, deliberately or ignorantly (Hassan, 2020). Most studies on mass media campaigns are emphatic on the issue of the people's attitude in terms of the degree of reception and adoption of a particular idea, programme or innovation. Accordingly, deification precedes behavioural change or modification for the achievements of the desired goals. It is therefore stated that for a modification of attitude and behaviour, effective communication must be presented and articulated before there can be any useful mobilization.

However, when communicating health issues with the people, the problem of the appropriate medium to be used arises.Besides its convenience

and accessibility, local broadcast stationsare especially effective in Sub-Saharan Africa due to the region's culture of oral tradition. For example, radio or television programmes may include narratives in indigenous languages or traditional songs, which could not otherwise be conveyed in a magazine or newspaper (Panford *et al.*, 2001). The foregoing makes it imperative to leverage local stations in creating awareness over health issues. The problem here is: whether the Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) as a local station has been leveraged in creating awareness against the spread of the novel Coronavirus in Anambra State.

Broadcast Media Use in Crucial Information Dissemination

Broadcasting, according to Dunu (2002), is the most pervasive machinery or channel of communication that uses electromagnetic impulses to reach the public instantly without the connection of wires. Broadcasting is to spread idea, information or an impression to a larger audience simply for the purpose of carrying a larger audience. It is the one of the most powerful universal means of instant public communication through the conveying of information, entertainment, education and persuasion in form of programmes. Amongst its unique attributes is the ability to instantly reach a wider more varied group of consumer. Its unique usefulness lies in its capacity to surmount geographic and economic barriers to extend to the rich and the poor, old and young, rural and urban dwellers, the educated and the illiterate, the professionals, the majority and the minority (Uwakwe, 2010).

Broadcasting means the communication of news, instruction and entertainment by radio or television. Before the invention of wireless telegraph, however, the term broadcasting was mainly an agricultural term. It meant the free scattering of seeds as against careful planting in drills and rows. The parable of the sower in the new testament of the Holy Bible may not be superfluous at this juncture. It states that some of his seeds fell on good ground and did well, some of them fell on stony ground or on the way side or among thorns and were wasted. When considering radio, everything put out by these powerful media is like seeds. As the parable of the sower depicts, some minds are so closed up that nothing new can enter them and be established. This may be true of some rural dwellers. Most of them are regulated by solid entrenched socio-cultural norms, ethos and values. They believe so much in taboos, but a proper and proficient use of the broadcast media can be useful in opening up of the minds of not only the rural dwellers but also city dwellers globally through certain subtle means (Nwabueze, 2014).

In this connection, Babalola (1986) states that broadcasting transcends the barriers of literacy and reaches all the people without discrimination except those imposed by the people's own selective will. Among literate persons, it is believed that broadcast messages have immediacy which the print message lacks. Broadcast messages are of course easily forgotten but their impact continues to exercise an influence at the subconscious level. Indeed, a radio message tends to have greater mass appeal and this arguably makes it more effective for reaching the grassroots.

Therefore, to a people especially those in the rural areas a panoply of communication strategies including community radios must facilitate the exchange of information needed to enhance the improvement of the people in socio-economic or socio-political terms. Without prejudice to any of the methodologies, it is instructive to note that the entire range of communicative dynamics is considered an important vehicle for disseminating information about any occurrence.

Among the various mediums for health campaigns, broadcasting tends to have the most widespread impact in terms of number of audience members reached. Broadcast programmes are considered more effective in spreading HIV/AIDS information due to their greater audience scope; in South Africa, if the puppet theater program that changed the perception of just 3000 audiences about HIV/AIDS was broadcasted on one of today's popular radio station, like Metro FM or Umhlobo Wenene FM, there may have been over 5 million listeners ("SA," 2015).Besides its convenience and

accessibility, broadcasting is especially effective in Sub-Saharan Africa due to the region's culture of oral tradition. For example, radio or television programmes may include narratives in indigenous languages or traditional songs, which could not otherwise be conveyed in a magazine or newspaper (Panford *et al.*, 2001).

The Case of Coronavirus in Nigeria

The novel Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), first identified in Wuhan China in December2019, has rapidly spread to almost every region of the world. The disease is caused by a new andsevere type of Coronavirus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARSCoV-2). The infection has no immediate treatment and vaccine, and it has according to World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) become a worldwide pandemic causing significant morbidity and mortality. There are 1,603,428 confirmed cases, 356,440 recoveries from the illness and 95,714 deaths worldwide as of April 9, 2020 (Worldometers, 2020). On February 27, 2020, an Italian citizen became the index case for COVID-19 in Nigeria and as at April 9, 2020, there were 288 laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Nigeria with 51 discharges and 7 deaths (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, NCDC, 2020).

To prevent further spread of the virus, civil societies and government agencies embarked on enlightenment campaigns for good hygiene and social distancing. More often than not, local broadcast stations of radio and television were deployed in the campaigns. Temperature screening was conducted at airports and those returning from countries with numerous confirmed cases ofCOVID-19 were implored to self-isolate. The NCDC in association with state governments also began tracing and tracking of possible victims and their contacts. On March 18, 2020, the Lagos State Government suspended all gatherings above fifty people for four weeks and ordered alllower and middle level public officers to stay-at-home (Ewodage, 2020). Similarly, the Federal government on March 30, 2020 introduced various containment strategies such as closing of the national borders and airspace, schools, worship centers and other public places, canceling of mass gathering events and placing the Federal Capital Territory, Lagos and Ogun States on lockdown for an initial period of fourteen days (Radio Nigeria, 2020; Olatunji, 2020).

The Federal government and various state governments have been involved in distributing food stuff, money and materials as palliatives to cushion the effects of Coronavirus in the country. Even, well–to–do individuals in the country have also given out palliatives to the needy and less – privileged. Some of them donated money to the various governments to assist in providing the enabling ground to combat the novel COVID-19 and its effects in the country. Similarly, institutions, companies and organizations have paid their dues in contributing palliatives to both individuals and governments in Nigeria. In effect, the Nigerian economy has been battered in the face of COVID-19 pandemic.

Presently, the spread of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Nigeria continues to record significant increase as the latest statistics provided by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control reveal that Nigeria, as at 19th of July 2020, has 36,663 confirmed cases. 15,105 cases have been discharged and 789 deaths have been recorded in 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. A total of 212,201 tests have been carried out as of July 19th, 2020 compared to 209,446 tests a day earlier (Oyekanmi, 2020). On daily basis, local stations air these updates as public affairs broadcasts. The Anambra Broadcasting Service stations do more than just daily updates of the status of the virus. They also highlight the protocols prescribed by the NCDC to stem the spread of the Coronavirus in Anambra State.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and gratifications theory

The theory according to Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) describes how and why people seek and consume certain messages from specific media in order to satisfy their needs. The scholars argue that the theory is an audience-centered theory and tends to answer questions such as: why do

people use the media? What do they use them for? Many people are known to use the media to satisfy needs such as gain knowledge or certain information, for companionship, relaxation, entertainment, escape from reality and others. Katz et al., however, argue that the theory assumes that the audiences are active consumers of media messages as opposed to being passive and that they take an active role in interpreting the media messages to help them meet their needs and gratifications. This therefore means that the media must strive to research well to ensure that the messages or information they pass to the audience meet their needs and satisfy them.

This theory is applicable in this study because the audiences of local stations want information that will help them address the social-economic and political problems that COVID-19 has caused. The gratification that they get from the information and messages from listening to local television and radio stations influence the listeners to tune-in to the stations for updates on the novel Coronavirus. The audience' preference for local stations is based on the awareness that there is source credibility and that local stations are socially responsible to air authentic information at any time.

Anambra Broadcasting Service in Perspective (ABS)

The ABS is a local broadcast station owed by Anambra State Government of Nigeria. The station consists of both radio and television stations with locations at Awka and Onitsha. The Anambra Broadcasting Service started transmission on 1st October, 1960 as Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation (ENBC). Since then, the station had gone through several transformations to eventually become the ABS that it is today.

Presently, the station is very effective given the modern digital transformation of the state government has brought to it. It is operating in line with global trends, courtesy of a man of vision and taste in Governor Willie Obiano. From 1992 to the new millennium, ABS sojourned in different locations until January, 2002 when it relocated to its permanent site on the Enugu-Onitsha Expressway, Awka. At a time, ABS had three other operational sub-stations – the Broadcasting House, Onitsha, the television station at Awada and a booster station at Enugu-Ukwu. It transmitted on four major frequencies, two for television and two for the radio. The transmissions were received beyond Anambra State up to Enugu, Imo, Abia, Delta and Edo States.

The station now has modern digital studios, after it was rebranded into a state-of-the-art station. Today, ABS assumes the status of a world-class digital broadcasting outfit. ABS television is now available on Startimes Channel 113, Metrodigital Channel 29 and plans are underway to secure a channel on DSTV. ABS APP is also available for download on Google Play Store and live streaming via www.absradiotv.com. Through the e-channels, ABS news and other contents can be accessed from all over the world.

Discussion

The Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) is one local station that has embarked on massive awareness creation and campaign against the spread of the Coronavirus in Anambra State. The station has been involved in timely and on-demand updates about the Coronavirus. Anambra State Government has always given updates and instructions in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic using the local station. The notable protocols adopted to reduce the spread of the virus such as social distancing, wearing of face masks, washing of hands at least 20 seconds at regular intervals, use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer, forbidding to shake hands, kiss, embrace among others are frequently aired as public affairs broadcast in ABS. It has created jingles calling on the citizens to the reality of the existence of COVID-19 in the country. Regular updates on COVID-19 prevalence in Anambra State in particular and the nation in general are being aired on ABS on frequent intervals. The above submission is supported by Ezebuenyi et al. (2020), who held that local broadcast stations' campaigns are widely used to expose high proportions of large populations to messages through routine uses of existing media, such as radio and television.

The governor of Anambra State, Chief Willie MaduaburochukwuObiano, has been in the fore

front of the campaign using the state local stations, the ABS. He has always informed, enlightened and given out instructions to Anambrarians about the prevalence of the novel Coronavirus in Nigeria. The level of surveillance the ABS mounted on the environment in respect of the pandemic has been acclaimed. When an index case was recorded in the state, the ABS followed it up to the end. The second case also received heavy coverage from the ABS in demonstration of its social responsibility and agenda-setting functions. It has continued in that fashion and the station has not abandoned its surveillance and social responsibility functions. The above submission also draws support from an early observation by Ugande (2008), who held that local broadcast media stations are used for creating awareness about health issues. It is particularly appreciated for its strength in enhancing issues of development, which include health development. Also, Soola (2002, p. 22) while speaking in favour of local broadcast stations such as radio, contends that on a global scale, but particularly in developing countries, radio as a medium of communication has been a most potent communication innovation.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The great promise of leveraging local broadcast stations in campaigns lies in their ability to disseminate well defined behaviourally focused messages to large audiences repeatedly, over time, in an incidental manner, and at a low cost per head. More so, local stations avail the audience the opportunity to cross-check the validity of the messages aired at any point in time. Local stations are not faceless. They have physical structures, contacts, personnel and operate within the ambit of the law. Local stations as institutions and corporate citizens are socially responsible and therefore possess the strategic advantage and capacity to disseminate effective and reliable information which they offer the society in the face of the rampaging COVID-19 pandemic.

The campaign against the spread of the dreaded Coronavirus is a call to action, creating awareness and educating the populace on safety measures to adopt. This task cannot be left in the hands of faceless individuals who operate social media platforms for pecuniary purposes. The unwholesome assemblage of information found in social media platforms cannot be relied on to stem the spread of the dreaded COVID-19. In Nigeria presently, the campaign against the spread of the virus is currently running in over 50 local broadcast stations across the six geopolitical zones of the country and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), in addition to other broadcast stations across the breadth and length of the country, air news and programmes in form of campaigns against the spread of the novel Coronavirus in Nigeria.

With classrooms shutdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, local stations have been deployed as much-needed alternate methods to continue basic education. On air lessons have been intensified on local stations of radio and television across the nation. Radio as one of Nigeria's local media channels is reaching tens of millions each day, exposing the people on the need for safe, accurate information around handwashing, social distancing and the prevention and transmission of the virus. Disseminating messages through radio is especially effective to reach many people across rural areas.

It is therefore the position of this paper that leveraging local broadcast stations more than any other medium in the campaign against the spread of Coronavirus has the tendency of producing reliable, effective and effectual messages devoid of bias and unwholesomeness. With local news outlets, such as the ABS, there is filter, fact-checking and often absence of bias. Local broadcast stations can be consulted. They have verifiable evidence for their reporting with well trained journalists and operate within the confines of Nigerian Broadcasting Code (NBC).

The paper recommends among others that the people should seek information about the Coronavirus mainly from local stations rather than relying on unwholesome information from various social media platforms without filter, and fact-checking. Governments at all levels should leverage

the reliable, effective and effectual message delivery capacity of local broadcasting stations in any health management situation.

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