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Denial and Conspiracy Theory on Covid-19: The Nigerian Media Perspective

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Abstract: From the first Quarter of 2020, Coronavirus (COVID-19) dominated our lives and media platforms and it is considered as unprecedented health care crisis. At present, the fight against COVID-19 is either being lost or won around the world. But, what could make the virus not go away soon from Africa, particularly Nigeria, is the tendency to deny its existence. Conceptual and observation method this work reflects on the issue and signpost argument against claims that corona virus is a fraud and a non-existent disease. Many unguarded Nigerians claim that Bill Gates is at the forefront of a plan to exterminate Africans through a vaccine. Others argue that if there was corona virus, it must have been prepared in a Chinese lab. In fact, many Nigerians treated suggestions to wear facemasks or to apply certain preventive measures against infection from the virus with contempt. At each turn Nigerians are pummed with misinformation and disinformation. Readers and listeners of media messages are now expected to deal with news items that resemble original.

Keywords: Denial, Conspiracy Theory, COVID-19, Nigeria Media and Perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

The news one receives must satisfy certain criteria before it is accepted. It must be subjected to scrutiny or else it will pass as genuine if one is not careful. In the age of digitalism, one might be dealing with a news item that resembles the original when it is far from being the case. Humanity appears to have entered a phase of existence where anything is possible. According to Duke, (2012), "Information and communication technologies' (ICTs') enabled media could be used to communicate falsehood as truth. For example, social media messages have been used to inform, misinform or disinform people, depending on the intentions of the purveyors. It may be so convincing that it could make people yield to its message. This is the shape a conspiracy theory takes." Many conspiracy theories are unhealthy. They lead to strife and fuel hatred ethnic cleansing and, sometimes, genocides are traced to conspiracy theories (Sambo, 2020).

Prooijen and Vugt (2018) assert that conspiracy theory is the conviction that a group of 'actors' meets in secret agreement with the purpose of attaining some malevolent goal. This aligns with Atkins' (2009) view that denial is a refusal to believe in something or admit that something exists. The point is that both concepts have in the past negatively impacted the human condition (Arendt, 1958) that circumspection and critical thinking are required to navigate their vortexes. Transmitters of conspiracy theories are unconvinced by assertions tying individual progress to the trends of globalisation (Gulyas, 2016; Aaronovitch, 2010; Abalakina-paap, Walter, Craig, & Gregory, 2009). This is because disappointing results and disillusionment leave people with no hope. Hellinger (2019) agrees that the running of

the affairs of the world justifies to an extent the beliefs of this set of people. In Eastern Europe, the targets are usually Jews and Russians. This, perhaps, explains why during the Covid-19 pandemic, among Nigerians, millions of educated people on social media denounced in strong terms acceptance of donations or buying of pharmaceutical products from the Chinese government, Chinese businessman Jack Ma, or from the American Bill Gates.

Conspiracy theories can be defined as "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" (Douglas, 2019). This stands to appear in social crisis situations, which are times of heightened collective uncertainty and fear (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017). It has been proposed that these beliefs are a response to psychological needs (Douglas, 2017), and might constitute attempts to understand complex, otherwise hardly understandable and predictable threatening situations (Franks, 2013). Hence, it is not surprising that conspiracy beliefs have flourished with the COVID-19 pandemic, and that medical misinformation spreads at a spectacular rate (Kouzy, 2020). Interestingly, conspiracy beliefs also surged during the 1918–1919 Spanish flu pandemic (Spinney, 2017) and the 2009 H1N1 outbreak (Bangerteretal, 2012)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following concepts and issues are discussed in this study.

Coronavirus Disease in Nigeria: An Overview

Coronavirus Disease otherwise known as COVID-19 is an emerging infectious disease that broke out in December 2019. The contagious disease is traced to China and is presumed to have escaped from a Wuhan Science laboratory. It is a family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) (AbdulAzeez, 2020).

It is worthy to note that after the outbreak of the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or Asian flu and Ebola virus, the emergence of COVID-19 disease commonly known as Coronavirus shook the emotional foundation of the global community (Udende, Akpede & Adisa, 2020). From its insignificant outbreak in China, it spread to other countries of the world. Common signs of the infectious disease include fever, cough, shortness of breath, and other breathing difficulties. (WHO, 2020). The mode of transmission of COVID-19 is human-to-human, specifically through droplets from cough, sneezes and infected surfaces when one gets in contact with. The human-to-human transmission has been described with incubation times between 1-14 days, facilitating spread through droplets and contaminated hands and surfaces (Kampf, Todd, Pfaender & Steinermann, 2020).

In order to contain the spread of the disease to different states of the country, a multi- sectoral approach was adopted by the government by setting up a COVID-19 response team with the NCDC coordinating the various intervention activities in order to stem the tide of the virus. Several isolation centers were built across the 36 states of the federation including the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The effects of COVID-19 are quite many. The outbreak of the pandemic led to total economic meltdown of the economy. Several deaths were recorded as a result of the pandemic. Prominent people like government officials were known to have died as a result of COVID-19. For example, Abba Kyari - Nigeria's former Chief of Staff to President Muhammadu Buhari, who died as a result of the virus, is a case in point.

The education sector is the most hit of all the sectors of the Nigerian society; virtually all institutions of learning had to close down their activities. Business activities were brought to a standstill thereby increasing the rate of hunger in the country. This led to high rate of criminal activities like theft, rape, kidnapping and robbery. Social activities were equally suspended to contain the disease. Religious activities were halted to further stop the spread of the virus among religious faithful. It is important to note that with the adverse effects of the pandemic, Nigerian economy is gradually setting into recession.

Conspiracy Theory: Defined

Most people have a spontaneous understanding of the term 'conspiracy theory', but the term also has its own history and significance. People often picture cape-clad members of a secret group, clandestinely planning for world domination and for this or some other nefarious purpose manipulating the economy, politics and culture. However, the term originally referred to finding explanations for criminal behavior. It was only in the mid-20th century that social scientists began talking about conspiracy theories as a way of understanding how people could be drawn towards over-simplified explanations for major events. Other people are often labeled as conspiracy theorists as a way of devaluing or stigmatizing their opinions. Having previously regarded these simplifications as a psychological deviation, or a 'paranoid style', researchers now believe that conspiracy theories are extremely common.

They are defined as "an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor [behind events] a small group of powerful persons acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good." Our time is said to be characterized by information disorder, the instability of knowledge or having simply left the truth behind. The growing amount of disinformation and misinformation that washes over us, for example via social media, means that we need to understand how conspiracy theories become effective means by which misleading or incorrect information is intentionally or unintentionally spread. This spread is accelerated by societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a brief overview of the current research landscape, the difference between a conspiracy theory and having a theory about a conspiracy will be explained. Conspiracy theories are not only theories; they are also a form of meaning making narrative with a fixed structure and dramaturgy. As well as explanations of (actual) events that are always based on a kernel of truth, they can easily become myths or religion-like belief systems that explain the events' almost unearthly causes. They thus become harder to reach with rational thought and source criticism. Confusion between the categories of true and false (statements of fact, factual judgments) and good and evil (value judgments) is typical. But why are conspiracy theories so attractive, who believes them and when do they become dangerous?

COVID 19 Infodemia: Are the Media Misinforming, Disinforming or Malinforming the Public?

Since its discovery in late December 2019, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has led to several socially disruptive behaviors and generated a rapid spread of all kinds of information both of offline and online, dominating the headlines of newspapers, radio, and television news and social media posts. Onyekachi, & Musa, (2020) observed that "the abundance of reported information has led to confusion among the general public on the causes and cures for the disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that

there is a “massive infodemic” of false and accurate information in the media about the novel coronavirus. COVID-19 is characterized by the coronavirus disease pandemic and media “infodemic.” “Infodemic,” a portmanteau of “information” and “epidemic,” refers to the rapid spread of all kinds of information as a result of an epidemic.”

As the COVID 19 pandemic continues to cause distress, illness, and deaths, the media set agenda by reporting the news, but the media in most countries broadcast all kinds of information about the pandemic; conspiracy claims about coronavirus were inadvertently also reported. Moreover, some people use social media platforms to project inaccurate information concerning the source of the virus, cause panic among people, promote stereotypical views toward China and “Asian looking” persons, suggest unversed and bogus remedies, make people act in contradiction to authority, and subvert sound scientific advisories, intentionally, or unknowingly (Friday, 2021).

To counter these conspiracy theories and debunk false information, the WHO publishes daily situation reports and provides reliable data to the public. Although most Nigerians are highly knowledgeable about COVID-19 transmission modes, prevention, symptoms, and fatality, many of them support conspiratorial claims about sources of COVID-19 (Bebet, 2021).

Furthermore, as a result of the yawning gap in trust between Nigerians and the government, many members of the public saw COVID-19 as another conspiracy by the ruling elite to receive foreign and embezzle public funds. Nigerian citizens also maintained that COVID-19 is a “rich man’s disease” as the media only report the death of rich and famous Nigerians from the disease (Timi, 2020).

The media is characterized by what some have called information disorder. Previously, reliable rules about what can and cannot be seen as dependable information in the media reportages have been overturned by a more fluid information culture based on social media and online communication. Knowledge is no longer stable and knowledge-producing institutions or Expert knowledge that forms the basis for our modern media. How then can we determine what is true and false especially in media report. Conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation are expressions for an ongoing destabilization of societal debate. Disinformation is defined as intentionally spreading “all forms of false, inaccurate or misleading information”.

Misinformation involves unintentionally or unconsciously spreading such information. The European Commission has drawn up a policy for responding to disinformation online. In addition to the general threat scenario, this also describes the actions

taken by the Commission since 2018 and the concrete problems that exist.

Setting the COVID 19 Agenda: What Critical Roles for the Nigerian Media?

During all critical incidents, the media frame our understanding and create powerful forces at both individual and societal levels. The mental health of readers and viewers can also be affected by the media after tragic events. Potentially, the media have a proactive role in shaping the actions of the mass population and thereby influencing policy actions. The print media especially are considered a key avenue for taking information to the masses. However, in this information and communications technology (ICT) era, people are increasingly reluctant to carry hard-copy newspapers, instead preferring e-newspapers. At the present time, entire newspapers, and especially their opinion sections, are deluged by concerns about the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Every form of media in affected countries highlighted concerns by presenting news, perceptions, and opinions related to the pandemic (Onyekachi, & Musa, 2020).

According to Timi, (2020) “one of the fundamental responsibilities of the media is surveillance of the environment. The media perform this function in order to keep the society alert and vigilant in regards to impending dangers that may be risky to the generality of the wellbeing of the people. Health promotion is a cardinal responsibility of the media. The mass media are responsible for disseminating various health messages to ensure healthy living among the audience. The import of this assertion is that at the core of health promotion are the activities of the media to provide information to the citizens as well as communicate government policy directives to the audience to guarantee public safety.”

Uyoko & Akpan (2021) notices that “the surveillance role of the media, therefore, entails that the media constitute the eyes and ears of the public. The media provide information and alert the public on the right cause of actions in cases of emergencies so as not to be swayed by unverifiable information that would have negative impact on the health of the people (Lasswell, 2007). Gever (2015) states that, the media owe it as a duty to monitor the environment and report to the society with a view to averting impending dangers. He further observes that the surveillance function of the media occurs when they (media) scan the society, discover looming perilous activities and make them known to the public through their various programmes.”

Donohue *et al.* (1973) cited in Gever & Ezeah (2020) must have been referring to the surveillance function of the mass media when they submit that knowledge is an essential condiment that people need to take informed decisions in situations of crises. This assertion makes a strong case for media workers to constantly monitor the society and provide relevant and

sufficient information to members of the general public. The idea behind the surveillance function of the mass media is attributed to Lasswell (2007). In the views of Lasswell, the mass media typically play three roles to the society. These are: the surveillance of the environment, the correlation of the different components of society in responding to the environment and the passing of societal heritage from generation to generation.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds relevance in the Agenda-Setting Theory. The theory espouses that the media determine what issues to be considered most important by the society. The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972/1973 (Gever, 2015). Folarin (2000) states that, the agenda-setting theory implies that the media predetermine what issues to think about.

According to Folarin, the media do this through frequency of reporting, prominence given to the reports through headline display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics or timing on radio and television.

The theory is relevant to this study because one of the essential roles of the media is to alert the society on issues that affect peaceful coexistence of people. Through media programmes, information on the outbreak of killer diseases can be brought to the knowledge of the people.

In setting the agenda for the public, the media can collaborate with relevant government health agencies to educate the people on the mode of transmission and prevention of health related issues. Within the context of this study, the media have been performing these essential roles since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Through their various programmes, the media have been able to draw the attention of the public to the dangers of the pandemic and safety measures to be adopted to contain its spread.

DISCUSSION

From the review of scholarly concepts in the work as follow;

According to Musa, E. I. (2020), “it is evident that the majority of Nigerians perceived COVID-19 as ‘an exaggeration by political leaders and media’ which they possibly linked to an avenue by the political class to embezzle public funds.” A similar skepticism about the existence of COVID-19 was reported in the United States and Uganda. Uyobong & Folarin (2021). The claim that the virus is “a Chinese biological weapon” found support in the claims of the Nigeria Medical Association and the Nigeria Union of Journalists.

In the words Emmanuel, E. M. (2020) “it was possible that many Nigerians who indicated that COVID-

19 is ‘a population control strategy’ did so because of social media messages and the bribery allegation against Bill Gates in the country. As some preacher claimed, some people believed that it is “a plague caused by sins.” This is why the NCDC should rope in religious leaders in tackling the pandemic.”

It is worthy of notice that “an exaggeration by news media” was the least popular conspiracy theory in an organization. The high level of trust in the traditional media by Nigerians make Akpan (2021) to assert that watching television news predicted a greater belief in public health measures. Uko (2020) noted that “Since the traditional media is a trusted information source from the public’s perspective, the NCDC and policymakers should use it to disseminate important COVID-19 information.

To curb misinformation about COVID-19, the NCDC and other relevant organizations should actively use the media to spread accurate information to the public. Conspiracy theories can also be countered when people engage in the in-depth reading of the whole story, not just news headlines, and check for correctness of the information. The traditional media agencies should engage in pre and post fact-checking of news items to verify issues of concern before reporting. Furthermore, Nigeria’s political leaders should ensure good governance and accountability to win public trust which is needed to effectively tackle COVID-19 (Duke, 2021).

CONCLUSION

From the study, it could be summarized and concluded that COVID-19 conspiracy theories are pervasive among Nigerians. The most popular COVID-19 conspiracy theories in Nigeria are claims that COVID-19 is “an exaggeration by political leaders and media” and “a Chinese biological weapon.” Information about COVID-19 in Nigeria is mostly gotten from traditional and social media. While Nigerians trust the accuracy of COVID-19 information from the NCDC and traditional media, they distrust comments by their political leaders and information on social media about COVID-19 keeps on misleading the public.

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