



THE JOURNALIST AND SOCIAL BURDEN: A CRITIQUE OF MODE OF COVID -19 REPORT

KABIRU IDRIS MUHAMMAD

Department of Mass Communication, School of General Studies, Kano State Polytechnic

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of mass media in capturing and disseminating Covid -19 related news. It also critiques the looming challenges that bedevil a Covid -19 reporter amidst the unprecedented spread of the virus. The paper further argues that a journalist should be patriot in reporting Covid -19 news objectively. This is for reason that Covid-19 is a global infectious disease that has affected many millions of people in the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on Jan 30, 2020, given its rising alarm on international public health concerns for it. Infact, it creates a public worry and force the general public to seek help from the most accessible ways available to them to keeping them informed about the effect of the virus as well as precautionary measures they would adopt in curtailing the spread of the virus. For most people, it is either the internet or media, which includes print, as well as broadcast options. In this way, the paper brings to the fore certain guiding light that will aid the reporter to unburden his civic responsibility as well as clinging onto his professional expertise as well as acumen in relaying covid - 19 news. Some reporters shy away from their responsibility in giving authentic and reliable story, because of their sentimental whims. The virus is life-threatening in that care must be taken in revealing all coverage of disease by a journalist or a reporter. The paper offers some recommendations on how to improve in curtailing the disease and conclusion is given as well.

Keywords: *Journalist, Covid - 19 Report, critique, social burden and news.*

Introduction

Covid-19 is a global infectious disease that has affected many countries throughout the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on January 30, 2020 as a result of its rising alarm on international

public health. At worst, it creates a public worry and force the general public to seek help from the most accessible ways available to them to keeping them informed about the effect of the virus as well as precautionary measures to adopt in curtailing the spread of the virus. For most people, it is either the internet or media, which includes print, as well as broadcast options. Against this background, this paper discusses the challenges facing a news reporter and debilitating threat facing journalist profession in terms of reporting Covid -19 news. The paper also brings to the fore certain guiding principles that a Covid -19 reporter should embrace in reporting his or her news.

What is News?

There are almost as many definitions of news as there are journalists; even laymen in the streets can readily come up with acceptable definitions of news (Luke, (Ed.).

(N.D). In general terms, news is very relative and depends on what one thinks is news (Agbese, 2008). At any given moment, millions of events happen simultaneously throughout the world. For example, the expressions: (1) “Governor Ganduje sacks Commissioner of Special Duties” , (2) Kwankwaso`s father dies recently” (3) “ The second wave of covid- 19 surges in Nigeria in early January, 2021, are potentially measured or rated as news. However, they do not become news until some reporters give an account of them in detail and with a sense of objectivity. In other words, news is all about the account of an event, not the event itself. Collaborating this, Sam Zelman of CNN says: "News is what is important because of its impact on society; it is what people need to know and what they want to know" .

From this background, therefore, news must be accurately appealing, unbiased account of a current or timely event, which is reported in the mass media and is significant to a large number of people in a locality. Furthermore, in contemporary thinking, today`s news is about real life, real people, real events, real places or real issues in a real world reported in real time, using any available means of communication. Aligned to this, the novel covid- 19 is worth-reporting, given its devastating impact on people`s socio-economic and political life. It is factually based following its realities. The news must account for how many people are affected by it vis-à-vis the way it undermines their socio-

cultural and economic plight. Diplomatically put, it needs to specify and determine the essence of public response or reaction as well as the extent to which the information may be useful. Again, an item or event, according to Folarin, *et al.* (2006), may give rise to thought not because of itself but because of its probable consequences to its significance.

Covid- 19 Pandemic

It is pertinent to note that Covid-19 is a global infectious disease that emerged from Wuhan in the Hubei province of China in December 2019. At worst, it has spread to 230 countries throughout the world (World Health Organization. (2020). World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on January 30, 2020 by virtue of its rising alarm on international public health. Inherent in it, Covid 19 affects the respiratory system with symptoms ranging from fever, cough, and mild shortness of breath, to severe desaturation, causing respiratory failure (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2020). Despite the lung damage in the form of adult respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), there are reports of the novel virus creating a thromboembolic condition in the body and hence causing myocardial infarction and pulmonary embolism (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2020). It can also result in renal failure in several patients. The prominent channels of spreading the disease include: droplets, airborne, or feco-oral, etc. There is news of viruses staying viable on surfaces from a few hours to many days. This heterogeneous spectrum of disease is concerning and one of the reasons for the increased fatality of the disease.

The Impact of Mass Media on Covid -19 and Its Attendant Lockdown

The worsening effects of the Covid -19 create a public worry and force the general public to seek help from the most accessible ways available to them. This compels many people opt for internet or media, which includes print, as well as broadcast options to fetch news about the virus. The internet is considered a worldwide media accessible to people. However, print media writers often utilize the internet platform to disseminate their Covid-19 related news because of imposing lockdowns, which prevent newspaper's readers and other reading audience access to newspapers. Equally, the radio and television, especially private-based have contributed a lot in relaying Covid-19 related

news to a large audience. Typical example of such radio stations, are Alheri radio Kaduna, Farin wata radio Katsina, Freedom radio Kano, Rahama radio Kano, to mention but a few. In an event of epidemic or pandemic, controlling the spread of disease is a basic requirement in that the role of media is incumbent.

Plausibly, the disease (Covid-19) requires early recognition of symptomatology, prompt diagnostic measures, effective hospice management (home care), and appropriate preventive steps or safety measures. This in turn, requires the role of varying departments ranging from government to healthcare to make optimal utilization of the media forums to pass across their messages on precautionary measures to general public. This is because whenever a new virus or bacterial disease emerges, it goes through localized transmission, amplification in the spread, and finally, the remission with successful measures. In this way, the effective way to sensitize the people, apart from pharmaceutical measures, is through media channels. The reporters gather authentic information about the number of persons affected by the virus- Covid -19 as well as the specific locations of the people. The method of news reporting modifies the behaviour of people and their attitudes towards Covid -19. Media reports of the Covid -19 have undoubtedly raised fear and awareness among people. On the one hand, it helped people to adopt essential protective measures. At the eve of nationwide lockdown in Nigeria, a barrage of news on the devastation of Covid- 19 was at play. Such news often impact greatly on people`s life and livelihood. The persistent spread of news by different media houses about the mass death in Kano State during the first wave of the pandemic really created fear in people into believing the reality of the virus on the one hand, and on the other compelled them to take responsibility. In other words, the mass media play key role in this regards.

As far the lockdown days is concerned, the media played key role in notifying the days and time of the lockdowns in the world. At best, the local radio stations in Kano, such as Vision radio, Freedom radio, Rahama radio, Guarantee radio , have demonstrated patriotic zeal in relaying information concerning the rate of Covid- 19 cases vis-à-vis the statistical feature in various states in Nigeria, including the time frame of lockdown imposed. This underscores that the

interaction between media awareness and disease control is a two-directional approach.

The Nature of Covid- 19 –Based Stories from Mass media Perspective

By its very nature, Covid -19-related news is the product of the usual routine reporting. In other words, they are straightforward news stories, given the fact that such stories are published in commercial newspapers or electronic media. Covid 19-based news are never interpreted, editorialized or laden with reporter's biases and prejudices. They are stories, which are objectively anchored on facts. Put succinctly, a reporter adds or subtracts nothing from the facts on which the story is based. Covid- 19 story must be simple, accurate concise and understandable to the teeming listeners or readers.

Timeliness of Covid -19 News

Today's news may be stale tomorrow (Ewelukwa, 2004). Therefore, to attain that reader, viewer or listener's interest or appeal, facts about Covid -19 must be fresh, as people are eager to reading, viewing or listening new experiences about Covid- 19. These accounts for a reporter to be on move in getting new package of news that are timely. In this way, the best time to tell an important story is as soon as it happens or as soon as possible. Equally, the reporter is expected to tell his composed Covid -19-related stories in a way that their listeners or audiences are compelled to see or read to the end.

News Gathering and Sources

Every story begins as a stream does "from a source" (Rinehart & Ekeanyanwu 2008). Simply put, one cannot find a great story today that does not have a source. This is the major reason most persons who are unfamiliar with the news gathering process often wonder how reporters gather and assemble their information, how do they get access to information and information sources, and how do they sustain the daily publication of news in their media organisations. As far as the rubric of Covid -19 is concerned, it is aligned to predictable source of information since is imbued with factual happenings.

Predictability as Rudiment for Covid -19

Given its fact-packed rubric, Covid -19 must source its raw data or information from reliable source. This source regularly services the news that makes their

activities of public interest or by their nature that help generate events that attract a large number of people. Predictable sources, through which Covid -19 reporter could source his information are published reports in form of newspapers, magazines, journals, and handouts, broadcast on Radio/TV and prepared speeches. It also includes active or dramatic newsbreaks, which include news from the hospitals, hotels, schools, religious organisations, labour and political. With foregoing, the predictable sources, one is sure to get something from there all the time.

Covid -19 News Coverage

Since Covid -19 is life-threatening disease, it is incumbent upon a reporter to be meticulous in the covering of event. In other words, he or she must go the scene of the news event and observe events as they unfold and talk to people who witness the event as it happens or consider an eye witness accounts. Equally, he or she is expected to consulting secondary sources like records, reports, documents, files, and so on to cross check and corroborate facts and figures of Covid -19 infections. The following are what a professional reporter of Covid -19 should venture into for him or her to produce full-fledged information:

- (a) **Published Materials:** News stories are sometimes recycled across the country by different media organisations in different ways (Charnley, 1997). In this way, a Covid- 19 is sometimes expected to read other newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets and newsletters, etc. When one is reading other publications for ideas, remember not to duplicate a story in one`s own newspaper report verbatim; only look for idea from which to develop your story about the information one has on Covid- 19. From Nigerian context, the reporter should access daily published report of Covid -19 produced by Presidential Task Force headed by Boss Gida Mustapha as well as a barrage of Covid -19-related news published by various state governments. In Kano, for example, information related to the update on Covid- 19 is readily secured from Commissioner of Health, including Covid -19 Response Committee headed by the Deputy Governor, Nasiru Gawuna.

- (b) News release:** News releases are also good and reliable means of gathering and compiling authentic information on Covid -19. In this way, releases from public relations persons are valuable sources of story ideas. A reporter of Covid- 19 is as a matter-of-fact should try to follow up on some of these regular releases that come to his or her media organisations, as they would impact greatly in one`s news coverage.
- (c) Government reports:** Government houses are information attraction places . On a daily basis, information and statistics flow from such places as regards to Covid -19 pandemic. This is evidenced in the way the Governor of Lagos, Sanwo Olu and Governor Dr, Abdullahi Ganduje, to mention but few took the bull by horns by providing daily briefings about Covid -19 aired by media organizations. The report, for instance, obtained from government contains not only the number of people affected by the virus but also the number of those recovered as well as the fatality rate. Therefore, such places are a recipe for finding out what and why of a particular piece of news. They are, in other words, a treasure chest of stories for a Covid -19 reporter.

Looming Challenges of Covid- 19

It is notably certain that media became the platform for spreading prejudice among people by spreading stories about the origin of the virus. This sometimes sets fear in people. Racial and socio-economic discrimination became apparent during the quarantine in some other places in Nigeria. Relaying this kind of information should be done with caution, as it may potentially create unhealthy atmosphere in people. Inaccessibility to equal healthcare made the situation worse in some states in Nigeria. To this end, a reporter needs to assess the situation before he or she reports. This is because under such unprecedented circumstances, the media has the potential to unite people and end discrimination by spreading awareness in people. It can also be an excellently resource for information verification. However, this can only be possible through the responsible use of media where proper checks and balances are in place. This way, it can help prevent the spread of rumours and end stigmatization of those affected by COVID-19.

Principles and Ethics of Covid- 19 Report

With looming health crises resulted from Covid -19 infection worldwide, it becomes imperative to come up with measures adoptable and adaptable for the flow of authentic news. Such measures, if well-harnessed and practiced by a Covid -19 reporter, will definitely impact greatly on the life of humanity. The following are some of the measures to be adopted by a Covid 19 report:

- **Accuracy in Relaying Covid -19 Information:** This is the last news virtue, because it is the pillar on which every story rests and Covid -19 included. News of Covid -19 can be regarded as accurate if all names, ages, addresses and direct quotations in the story are accurate or correct. The only way to meet this requirement is for the reporter to check, double check or even triple-check his or her facts before going to the press (Malemi, 1999). He or she should not tamper with the facts of a story no matter the benefits that he or she may accrue from it as a result, because this is an unforgivable offence in journalism (Obe, 2006). Any reporter who tampers or fabricates the so-called facts of a story is “finished” in the industry. To ensure accuracy, observing, understanding and asking follow-up Questions is pertinent.
- **Objectivity in Relaying Covid -19:** As far as Covid -19 is concerned, objectivity presupposes that the reporter presents the reader with all sides of an issue, presents all the facts and allows the reader to decide what these facts mean. According to (Brooks, 2000), for a story to be objective, it must be devoid of a reporter’s biases and prejudice. It must not also be slanted or editorialized. In other words, it should not be editorialized instead be left, if necessary, to the editorial writers. A Covid -19 reporter must be as straightforward and objective as possible by keeping himself or herself and other reporters out of the story.
- **Truthful Rendition of Covid -19:** All news about Covid -19 must represent factual events and incidences. The reporter should also ensure that the facts of the news are truthful to the best of his or her knowledge before publishing or broadcasting such story. According to Byron Calame cited in Mencher (2010), “A fundamental motivation of reporters is the curiosity that drives them to get to the bottom of a confusing or complicated situation and to find patterns that help explain

it to readers. Making sense out of chaos-especially when you can do it first-is something many reporters find rewarding.” A lot of places and information are available for the Covid -19 reporter who is very thorough in his job and desires to verify every fact that goes into his story before publication. During a pandemic, when facts are often mixed with rumours, it becomes difficult to learn essential information about an issue. Some of these avenues are found in the reference manuals maintained in most newsrooms or in newspaper libraries. Again a Covid-19 reporter is expected to use local and area telephone directories and State Manuals/Brochures to verify the certain information he or she is in doubt of reporting. These sources provide information on various government agencies. In addition, the use of Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations is important, as this will help a reporter to not to quote anyone out of context.

- **Balance and Fairness in Reporting Covid- 19-Related Incidence:** This entails treating all sides of Covid- 19 story equally without showing any form or evidence of bias and partiality. This could also be described as giving equal attention and prominence to the two sides of a story. In broadcasting, it is called the “Fairness Doctrine” (Hule, & Anderson (2003). The views expressed by opponents on an issue must be given adequate judgment and coverage without any form of preferential treatment to any of the opposing views. Balancing up a news story is tasking indeed (Bonder, 2005). Unless a reporter remains objective, he or she will miss out this crucial requirement. From this perspective, a reporter of Covid- 19 incidence may be trapped by having contrary information or ideas expressed by certain people about Covid -19-related issues. So when such happen, he or she is expected to carefully weigh the information by hearing from both sides in order to have balanced rendition of information. For example, in many states in Nigeria, there was a series of incidence in which many destitute in the states complained that they didn’t received any Covid -19 palliatives while from the government side, it said palliatives have been distributed to people or destitute. The Covid -19 reporter, in this context, needs to

hear from both sides so as to have balanced story to relay to general public.

Necessity as bedrock for Disseminating Covid- 19 Issues

The value of necessity is, however, the journalist's making (Mencher, 2010). According to him (ibid), the journalist has discovered something he or she feels it is necessary to disclose. The essential element here is that the journalist considers a situation to be something everyone should know about and usually it is a situation that needs to be exposed and remedied (Harper & the Indiana Group (1998). From this background, the reporter of Covid -19 is necessary for him to be patriot in revealing all information related to Covid -19 so that people will be fully sensitized on the danger inherent in the disease as well as precautionary measures to be adopted in curtailing the spread of the virus.

Recommendations

The paper offers the following recommendations:

- The Covid -19 reporters need to sensitize people to stop discriminating against the infected persons in form of stigma, discrimination and prejudice.
- In the current pandemic, the media should play a key role in promoting physical and psychological health measures.
- The media should encourage the use of face-masks among the masses and bring to the notice to the government to provide them rather than people having to pay out of pocket to purchase them.
- Media houses should set it as duty-bound to have adequate coverage of Covid -19 pandemic and pinpoint the pharmaceutical measures to use.
- The government should provide all palliatives to alleviate the suffering of the masses affected by the Covid -19.
- Media reporters should be meticulous in bringing authentic news that people would lay their hands on to improve on their health matters.
- Media organization should see that their reporters are adequately disciplined.

Conclusion

Covid -19 has become an intractable pandemic that on daily basis affect the life and livelihood of many people in Nigeria and the world in general. The role of

mass media in this respect is very cumbersome and necessary. The paper critiqued the looming ineffectiveness and unprofessional approach of certain Covid- 19 reporters who downplay their assignment. Equally, the paper advocated for certain measures that could be put in place by a Covid -19 reporter in order to come up with reliable news or report. This is because the pandemic is still posing a devastating alarm to socio-cultural and economic activities of people. At worse, it caused untold incidences to people by not allowing them to behave in turn. Overall, as argued by the paper, a journalist needs to be professionally versatile and responsible in reporting his or her gathered news on Covid -19.

Reference

- Agbese, D. (2008). *The Reporters' Companion*. Lagos: Newswatch Books Limited.
- Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. (2020). How you can respond to DV during COVID-19. Retrieved May 20, 2020 from https://acws.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-08_How-you-can-respond-to-DV-DURING-COVID.pdf.
- Bonder, F. F.; Davenport, J. R. & Drager, M. W. (2005). *Reporting for the Mass Media* (8th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, B.S.; *et al.* (1998). *News Reporting and Writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Charnley, M. (1996). *Reporting*. Toronto: Holt.
- Rinehart & Winston. Ekeanyanwu, N. T. (2008). *International Communication*. Ota: Covenant University Press.
- Ewelukwa, B.N. (2004). *Introduction to Nigerian Press Law*. Onitsha: Maranatha Press Limited.
- Folarin, *et al.* (Eds.). (2006). *Themes in Communication Writing*. Lagos: SMC.
- Harper, C. & the Indiana Group (1998). *Journalism 2001*. Madison: Coursewise Publishing.
- Hule, B. D. & Anderson, D.A. (2003). *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- <https://www.businesstoday.in/technology/news/coronavirus-87-percent-increase-in-social-media-usage-amid-lockdown-indians-spend-4-hours-on-facebook-whatsapp/story/399571.html> 2020
- Malemi, E. (1999). *Mass Media Law: Cases and Materials*. Lagos: Grace Publishers Incorporated.
- Mencher, M. (2010). *Mencher's News Writing and Reporting* (11th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Mencher, M. (2003). *News Reporting and Writing* (9th ed.). California: McGraw-Hill.
- Ike S. Ndolo, I.S.(Ed.) (N.D) *Contemporary Issues in Communication and Society*
- Luke, U. U. (Ed.). (N.D). *Mass Communication, Democracy and Civil Society in*

Africa: International Perspectives-

Nwodu, L.C. (N.D). *Journalism Practice: News, Aesthetics, Laws and Ethics*

Nwosu, I.E. (Ed.) (N.D). *Mass Communication and National Development*

Obe, J. (2006). *Reporting Diverse Areas: A Concise Text*. Akure, Nigeria: SMC.

Obijiofor, L. & Hanuschu,F. *Journalism Across Cultures: An Introduction*

World Health Organization. (2020). [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations--emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations--emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov))