



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF MEDICAL RESEARCH: K
INTERDISCIPLINARY

Volume 14 Issue 5 Version 1.0 Year 2014

Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal

Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)

Online ISSN: 2249-4618 & Print ISSN: 0975-5888

Media Reportage of the Ebola Crisis: Lessons from Nigeria

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GJMR-K Classification: *FOR Code : QW 160*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



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I. INTRODUCTION

Without a shred of doubt, one of the most devastating news items in the second half of the year 2014 has been the outbreak of the dreaded Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). Initially present in East Africa around the Congo River Region, the disease stealthily and devastatingly found its way into West Africa, ravaging Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and to a lesser extent Nigeria.

Ordinarily, Nigeria would have been spared the unfortunate incident of the disease but for the wicked act of Dr. Patrick Sawyer, an Ebola patient from Liberia, a country that is gradually recovering from over a decade of a brutal civil war. The action of Sawyer put Nigeria on the dangerous map of Ebola. With the onset of the strange and deadly disease, many Nigerians were outraged, and panic momentarily took over. Indeed, no news had been as frightening as the outbreak of the disease which, experts say, has a high mortality rate of more than half of those infected. The bad news brought out the best in the media, both locally and internationally. They quickly rose up to their social responsibility of being the fourth estate of the realm. In this process, they discharged creditably and rapidly, their functions of surveillance of the society by

unearthing potential and present dangers and pointing the way forward. The Nigeria government was also at its best in terms of providing leadership.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

It is natural, even desirable, to throw light on some expressions used in this presentation with a view to avoiding a measure of wooliness often associated with certain terms. For the purpose of this work, the following words/expressions will be defined. They include: mass media, crisis, credibility and public opinion.

a) Mass Media

Defleur and Dennis (1981, p.4) defines mass media as “devices for moving messages across distance or time to accomplish mass communication”. On his part, Uyo (1987 p.1) concisely defines it as “path way or means” of reaching large, diversified audiences spread across geographical divides. Therefore, mass media are all the channels, avenues, opportunities of spreading mass communication messages. Over decades, even centuries, newspapers, magazines, radio, televisions and others have been deployed to achieve the purpose of reaching many persons almost simultaneously.

b) Crisis

According to Nasarinha (2009, p.192) a crisis is an unpredictable major threat that can have a negative effect on an organization, industry or stakeholders. The author further notes that a crisis has three broad features: (i) a crisis cannot be predicted, but it can be expected (one cannot say when it will occur); (ii) a major threat that has the potentials to disrupt organizational operations in some way (closure of production); and (iii) a crisis can threaten the organization, the industry or the stakeholders (Ajala, 2001).

In fact, any development which causes discomfort, loss of money, loss of good health and any other valuable possession, disruption of normal productive activity is definitely a crisis. Without doubt, therefore, the Ebola outbreak is a crisis of monumental proportions ravaging West Africa and threatening the entire human race.

c) Credibility

This is an important characteristic of the mass media. Uyo (1987) notes that credibility is not an innate

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characteristic of the media since it is earned through the performance of those who run the media. A medium that performs professionally and responsibly is likely to be believable, hence credible. For instance, in Nigeria, many government owned and run media suffer a low level of credibility on account of their clear partisanship and pro-government stance. On the other hand, many privately owned and run media such as **The Guardian**, **Vanguard**, and **The Punch** Newspapers e.t.c. and Channels Television, African Independent Television (AIT) e.t.c. enjoy a relatively high credibility rating among many readers and viewers in Nigeria.

d) *Public Opinion*

This an important concept in managing people. It deals with "aggregation of and expression of individual opinions about a public concern, expressed in such a manner as to be perceived by public decision makers" Blake and Harold son (1975, p.99). Quite often, issues of public opinion are somewhat fluid. But certain decisions, actions or in actions of those in government often touch the jugular of the people, prompting them to react in different ways. Any responsible and responsive government must devise an effective mechanism of monitoring and responding rapidly, to the heart-felt opinions of their people. This is inevitable because of the social contract between governments and their peoples.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories and practices are like two sides of the same coin: complementary. An understanding and appreciation of theories is invariably necessary for effective practical applications. Given this scenario, the widely used agenda setting theory of the press is being explored as a theoretical basis for this presentation.

According to Folarin (2002, p.75):

Agenda setting implies that the mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. Agenda setting does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

This is indeed an important function of the mass media as they are saddled with the responsibility of putting on the table the issues of the day so that citizens may think about them. Being professionals, media people are able to present certain issues as being more urgent and of relatively high importance.

Indeed, every issue cannot rate equally in the estimation of the media. For instance, issues of insecurity are usually rated higher in importance as they are at the heart of peoples' survival. That obviously explains the huge airtime and newspaper and magazine space devoted to the problem of insurgency in North Eastern Nigeria, brutally orchestrated by the Boko

Haram sect; and, of course, the onset of the dreaded Ebola Virus Disease.

In highlighting the important issues of the day, the media, according to Folarin (2002), employ such devices as the frequent reportage of certain news stories e.g. the placement and space allotted to such stories and the airtime, space and frequency of commentaries or editorials accompanying or following quickly on the heels of the stories.

IV. MEDIA AND EBOLA

As previously stated, one of the most important functions of mass communication is surveillance of the environment to ensure safety of the people. After all, a society or community is all about the people who inhabit it. Therefore, every effort must be geared towards their safety and survival.

It was not therefore surprising that the mass media, locally and internationally, took up the gauntlet following the devastations unleashed by the onset of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), popularly abbreviated as Ebola. On the local scene, the media reportage of the scourge was appropriately generous. Most of the stories received lead treatment in newspapers and magazines. A random sample of newspapers and magazines available to this researcher shows a generous devotion of space to Ebola related stories.

A sample will do at the juncture. In its front page lead story, **Sunday Vanguard** of August 31, 2014 reported: "Ebola: 39 foreigners held in Lagos." In its August 17, 2014 edition, **Sunday Vanguard** lead story was entitled: "Ebola Patient Discharged"; **Sunday Express** of August 24-30, 2014 front page story: "Ebola Scare: Top Actor, Van Vicker, flees location." **Sunday Sun** of August 17, 2014 led with a cheering story: "Ebola Miracle: Nigerian doctor Survives, Discharged from hospital, 4 others almost fully recovered. Sawyer's widow attacked for defending husband."

The proactive measure taken by the Federal Government of Nigeria was captured in a front page lead story: "Ebola Scare: FG shuts schools till October 13 published by **Vanguard** August 27, 2014; Summer Coaching in both public and privates schools affected; Adadevoh's Sister Ebola-free; Nigeria records 61.5% Survivors; don't stigmatize Ebola victims."

The media in Nigeria have appropriately celebrated the late Dr Stella Adadevoh, the senior medical officer at First Consultant Hospital Lagos where the index case was recorded. She had the professional responsibility of treating Dr. Patrick Sawyer, another name for disaster and insincerity. Dr Sawyer had lied that he had acute malaria according to media report. But an acutely professional Dr Adadevoh would not accept such explanation. She was determined to medically ascertain the illness that had knocked down the Liberian American. As if there was a grand

conspiracy, many persons from different quarters brought pressure to bear on her to let the patient go. But she would not succumb to pressure. In order to see the case to its logical conclusion, the brave doctor had to contact the Lagos State Ministry of Health; a singular action that saved Nigeria from what is obviously one of the worst plagues of the 21st century. Given Nigeria's huge population, the public health disaster that would have resulted from a premature discharge of Dr. Sawyer would have been unimaginable.

Not unexpectedly, therefore, the media have appropriately canonized Dr Adadevoh for her sacrifice, having died from her primary contact with the cunning Dr Sawyer. The **News Magazine**, one of Nigeria's respected news magazines, in its September 1, 2014 edition, did a front page story on Adadevoh entitled "What you don't know about Dr Adadevoh". The magazine highlighted the action of Dr. Adadevoh, commending her exemplary courage, professionalism and patriotism.

Besides the effort of the local media in Nigeria, the international media have not relented in drawing attention to the epidemic which has posed a public health danger of utmost urgency to the entire humanity. The New York-based Cable News Network (CNN), like other media houses, has been in the fore front of reporting the devastating outcome of the Ebola virus. In its September 1, 2014 major news broadcast, "the world's news leaders", as it brands it self, did a heart-rending story of the ravages of Ebola in a Liberia village where many had died and the survivors in utter panic and total disarray. The news story showed clearly the terrible destruction of human lives caused by Ebola. The CNN reporter had gone with health officials to bury the remains of an Ebola victim. She was careful to put on the protective clothing of medical personnel!

Nobody else could come near; as the corpse was equally dangerous since the virus did not die with the victim. The entire village was desolate and the reporter managed to comport herself professionally despite the grave situation she found herself in. The situation was so bad that even Liberia's deputy health Minister, according to media reports, was put in quarantine on suspicion of being infected with the dreaded virus.

Apart from devoting substantial editorial space and airtime to the Ebola crisis, most media organizations have equally given attention to public enlightenment on how to safeguard people from being infected by the virus. The pay channel, DSTV, which is widely accessed in Africa by the elite, has a well illustrated public service announcement in which viewers are told how Ebola is contacted and what to do to avoid being endangered.

In Nigeria, many local media have also made commendable efforts to highlight the dangers of Ebola

by providing relevant information. The Delta Broadcasting Service, Asaba and Warri, owned and operated by the Delta State Government, South South Nigeria, have translated the protect-yourself-against Ebola message into all the languages and dialects in the state to ensure reach and penetration.

V. GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN THE EBOLA CRISIS IN NIGERIA

Following Dr Adadevoh's information to the Lagos State Ministry of Health, the Governor, Raji Fashola, went to work immediately, alerting the Federal Government. Displaying unusual commitment and professional savvy, both governments mobilized Nigeria's human and natural resources wisely and promptly, thereby averting what would have amounted to a disaster of monumental proportions, given that Nigeria is the largest concentration of black people on earth. Putting aside partisan politics and the base sentiments that have put Nigeria down for long, the Federal Government of Nigeria and Lagos State Government worked in rare harmony, achieving incredible results in the process. In a swift response, many Ebola screening and containment centres were constructed while the Lagos State Infectious Diseases Hospital in Yaba was quickly upgraded and become the epicenter of Ebola management and many persons suspected to have had any form of contact with the index case or secondary sources were promptly quarantined. After 21 days, being the incubation period of the virus, those who were free of the disease, were released while those found 'guilty' were detained for further necessary action.

Providing rare leadership, the Federal Government through the supervision of the Minister of Health, Professor Onyebuchukwu Chukwu did the needful, injecting huge funds which were apparently well managed. The Ministry also deployed adequate public information machinery network to let residents know about the plague and the preventive measure which should be taken to prevent a spread of the disease. Government appropriately advised religious groups and others that have a proclivity for gathering crowds to stop forthwith while handshakes and other tactile activities were officially discouraged. Government information also advised improved personal hygiene by constantly washing hands with sanitizers or soap and running water. The Federal Government quickly understood and appreciated the enormity of the problem by promptly declaring Ebola a national emergency. **Vanguard** of August 7, 2014 gave the story a well deserved front page treatment and generous space in inside pages.

The public health hazard posed by the Ebola crisis must be the worst in the past few decades in the world, particularly in West Africa where over 3,000

persons have been reported dead as at the last count. In Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia where the disease has assumed an epidemic proportion, the fear of Ebola appears to be the beginning of wisdom! With over one million people quarantined in Sierra Leone, according to media reports, no one needs be told that the crisis has assumed an agonizingly dangerous proportion.

As a proactive step, the Federal Government announced that primary and secondary schools in the country would resume on October 13, for the 2014/2015 academic session. The date was later reviewed and a new resumption date of September 22, 2014 was announced, an indication of the effective handling of the disease. Indeed, the fight against the dreaded Ebola virus Disease has been largely successful in Nigeria and for a long time, Nigeria government has a legitimate reason to congratulate itself even as it received accolades locally and internationally.

Notable among those praising the effort of the Nigeria Government is the United States of America. In a front page story entitled "US to Citizens: Nigeria contained Ebola; we can." **The Guardian**, and other newspapers, reported the US Government as getting inspiration from Nigeria on how to contain the disease. Encouraged by the success rate recorded by Nigeria, the United States of America had dispatched medical experts to study how Nigeria tamed Ebola. In a front page story, **Vanguard** of October 2, 2014, relying on statement from the US CDC director, Tom Frieden, reported inter alia that "Nigeria's extensive response to a single case of Ebola shows that control is possible with rapid, focused interventions." In the same vein, the October 20 certification of Nigeria as being completely Ebola free is a landmark in the fight against the deadly disease

This is significant for those who understand the usual relationship that often exists between the richer and poorer nations; the developed and developing nations, where the latter is always expected to look up to the former for financial aids and other forms of assistance. For once, this is a classical case of role reversal to the advantage of Nigeria and the developing world.

Doubtless, the management of Ebola scourge is a classical case of success of public health where different officials showed leadership at different levels. Speaking at a political event in Benin City, Edo State, Midwest Nigeria, Good luck Jonathan, Nigeria's President had observed that Nigeria had defeated the dread Ebola virus Disease, assuring that the success would be extended to the destruction of the equally dreaded Boko Haram sect, operating in Nigeria's North Eastern flank (**The Guardian**, September 28, 2014).

Nigeria's success in the fight against Ebola has been globally acknowledged with the mass media leading the cheer group. In the first two days of October

2014, the global media octopus CNN, aired special news and features on the Ebola crisis. The CNN quoted the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in the US as commending Nigeria for effectively containing the Ebola scourge. According to the report, Nigeria achieved the high level of contact tracing with those who came in contact with Patrick Sawyer, the index case in Nigeria. The country's health officials were able to identify all those who had primary contact with him, isolated them for at least 21 days, being the incubation period of the disease. There is a near consensus that Nigeria seems to have shrugged off its general lethargy in handling issues of public concern as it displayed rare proactivity in effectively containing the Ebola challenge.

In drawing attention to the public health challenge posed by Ebola, the media, both local and international, have discharged their social responsibility obligation to humanity, the epicentre of any development effort. As Jefkins (1985 p. 63) has observed, "in literate industrial countries, the news media-press, radio and TV- are major vehicles for the widespread dissemination of PR information". They go further to unearth and disseminate information relating to the environment, public health and other issues of development generally."

While acknowledging the first rate handling of the Ebola problem by the Nigerian Government, public health managers have warned the authorities in Nigeria not to relent in their effort to completely eliminate any traces of Ebola in the country. An expert in health issue 's, and Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) Babatunde Oslumtimehin has advised Nigerian clinics and hospitals to desist from turning patients away because of fear of Ebola noting that such actions could lead to ethical concerns for medical doctors and poor health care for sick people.

VI. COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES

It is a well known fact that communication is a basic human survival tool. In a local language adage in Nigeria, it is said that the stranger who is humble enough to ask is not likely to miss his way. The object of the enquiry is communication. Centuries ago, it took months of voyage to travel between continents. However, the invention of the airplane by the Wright Brothers has helped humanity move faster and more comfortably. In the area of information gathering and use, the introduction of the new media has been of immense benefit. This has been further enhanced with the triumphant 'arrival' of the information and technology facilities which have instant communication possibilities between places that are thousands of kilometers apart.

In Nigeria, viewers can monitor broadcasts of the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) radio and Television signals, the CNN, the VOA and other world

media within seconds. The Associated Press (AP), the Agence France Press (AFP), Reuters and other transnational news agencies are able to share news and pictures with readers and viewers across a news-hungry world. Verderber and Verderber (2008, p.102) were apparently referring to a similar situation when they wrote about the link between culture and communication. In their words:

How often have we heard people observe that the world is getting smaller and the people in it increasingly similar? Today, through the globalization of trade, the Internet and the World Wide Web, our lives are affected by the decisions and actions of people in other parts of the world and we can make instant personal contact with people around the globe through the click of a mouse.

Without doubt, the Ebola crisis which hit West Africa in year 2014 is a global issue, affecting the survival of the human race. It is not, therefore, surprising that international media have shown a professional interest in the challenge. Despite their diverse geographical locations, the foreign media are largely credible in developing countries. While it is easy to lay the blame of this on media imperialism, it is also wise to explore further by giving credit to the media of the industrialized countries for being technology-savvy to attain an edge over the media of the developing world.

According to Nwabueze (2014, p.47) "certain theories explain patterns of media exposure and content utilization" As for an media consumption is concerned, the uses and gratification has been found to be useful in contemporary media world because consumers are no longer docile consumers of media output, but active in selecting the materials that would gratify their needs.

VII. SUMMARY

The outbreak of the dreaded Ebola Virus Disease is without doubt the most earth shaking public health news on account of its negative impact. The epicentre of the Ebola 'massacre' is West Africa, devastating Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Nigeria would have been part of the 'war zone' but for the proactive measures taken by government. In the process, the media, locally and internationally, also performed creditably their surveillance function.

In order to achieve a measure of conceptual clarity, such terms as mass media, crisis, public opinion and edibility have been defined, while the agenda setting theory provides a theoretical framework for the presentation.

In dealing with the Ebola challenge, the Government of Nigeria was proactive and clinically professional, thus saving the world what would have been a great humanitarian nightmare. Thus this action

has, deservedly, earned the country global applause and commendation.

The local and international media have been forth coming in bringing the social problem to the attention of all, pointing the way forward.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the focus of this work which is the media report ape of the Ebola crisis and the efforts of the Nigerian Government to contain the spread, the following recommendations are put forward for consideration of those concerned.

1. The Nigerian Government should quickly bestow a posthumous national honour on the late Dr. Stella Adadevoh whose rare professionalism and patriotism in handling the index care in Nigeria of the Late Dr Patrick Sawyer, saved millions. Her personal sacrifice should be acknowledged by a grateful nation.
2. The leadership provided by the Nigeria Government must be sustained to ensure there is no pocket of 'Ebola resistance. It should also be extended to other segments of society.
3. All public institutions must be directed to have basic Ebola testing kits while government must provide the necessary infrastructure in handling the scourge.
4. Public enlightenment should be further strengthened by the media and other concerned groups or organizations with a view to keeping the disease at bay.

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