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The Potentials of Radio in Combating Misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria

Philip Effiom Ephraim

Abstract

Radio remains an important mass medium in Nigeria and across Africa. Issues of power availability, internet connectivity, and media costs, make radio a highly sort after medium for public information. However, the potentials of radio in efforts to combat misinformation about COVID-19 are yet to be fully exploited in Nigeria. Extant efforts have mostly focused on live press briefings, TV programming, SMS, and social media messaging. Media sources show that the spread of misinformation about the pandemic in the country is rife. This chapter critically evaluates the state of radio in Nigeria and proposes various strategies for utilizing its resources in efforts to debunk and minimize the spread of misinformation, with wider implications for Africa.

Keywords: radio, misinformation, COVID-19, Nigeria, Africa

1. Introduction

Radio as a mass medium employs electromagnetic radio waves through transmitters and antennas, to disseminate information, education, and entertainment to listeners. Attributed to the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) and several other inventors in Europe and the USA; radio has developed since the 1890s to become one of the most widely used mass media in the world. It is argued that despite the immense popularity of television and the internet, radio remains the mass medium that reaches the widest audience in the quickest possible time [1]. Statistics show that radio reaches over 5 billion people, representing 70 percent of the total world population. There are over 44,000 functional radio stations worldwide. Predictions based on research findings by Nielsen and Deloitte show that people aged between 18 to 34 will most likely spend more time on radio than watching television by 2025 [2].

The portability, convenience, cheap cost, and availability of free signals make radio a very popular medium in both developed and developing climes. In Europe and North America, radio is well established and has become a viable industry that generates billions of dollars annually. Within developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, radio is still maturing with many untapped potentials. There exist both state and private-run radio stations in most country capitals and other large cities and towns across Africa. However, their transmitters often reach only a few miles. People at the grassroots, often living in remote communities, are often excluded from these broadcasts [3].

In response to community needs for public information, community radio stations were established in several African countries in the 1990s. Community radio describes radio stations owned and run by people of a specific community to promote and protect the community's common interests and objectives [4]. Through community radio, people at the grassroots can voice their concerns on issues central to them including; health, gender relations, human rights, security and infrastructure. Countries like South Africa, Niger, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Mali have well established community radio networks. However, in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the first community radio was only established in 2015.

The arrival of radio in Nigeria could be described as the arrival of electronic broadcasting to the country. Radio was introduced to Nigeria in 1932. The first radio stations were established as re-broadcast stations for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Radio at the time served as a tool for spreading and reinforcing the narratives of the British colonial government. Radio helped colonial officers to keep abreast with current events in Britain. Locals were not considered in the programing and outreach activities; as the medium was meant to satisfy the information needs of the British colonialists and not Nigerians [5].

In 1951, the colonial government established The Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS). The NBS set out to convert all existing re-broadcast stations to fully-fledged and nationally focused radio stations. However, the NBS soon came under sharp criticism for being too pro-government and not working in the interest of citizens. The NBS was called out for its insensitivity towards the multicultural and religious sensibilities of the people. In April 1957, the NBS was reformed and restructured to become the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). The main goal of the NBC was to promote the establishment of regional radio and TV stations across the country. These broadcast stations were to maintain independence and impartially in their programing and outreach [6].

Sadly in 1966, the military overthrew the then civilian administration. However, radio under military regimes, still continued to develop. The NBC established radio stations in most state capitals. In 1978, the military government restructured the NBC and renamed it the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). The main goal of the FRCN was to manage federal government owned radio stations, with supervisory oversight on state owned radio stations. In 1992, the then military dictator of Nigeria General Ibrahim Babangida issued Decree 38 of 1992, granting permission for individuals to establish private radio stations. With the return to a democracy in 1999, Nigeria witnessed an expansion in radio broadcasting. State owned and private radio stations were established in the country's 36 states. Currently, the FRCN still manages radio in the country. There are currently over two hundred radio stations operating in Nigeria [7].

Infrastructural problems such as limited power supply, internet availability and costs, make radio hugely popular in Nigeria. Many Nigerians, especially at the grassroots, live far below the global poverty line and cannot afford to buy televisions, laptops or smart phones and hence, resort to radio as a key media source for daily information, education and entertainment. Despite the country's vast resources, most Nigerians are unemployed and live below the global poverty line, surviving on less than $1.90 a day [8]. Battery powered portable radios are widely used in cities and at the grassroots.

Currently in Nigeria, community radio together with more established state- and privately-owned radio stations, work together to disseminate public information to listeners in cities, towns and at the grassroots [9]. Radio functions not just as a mass medium for disseminating general information and entertainment, but also in particular as a medium for disseminating public health information, as witnessed during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

COVID-19, a deadly illness caused by a corona virus was first reported in Nigeria on February 27, 2020. The index case was an Italian construction worker who had returned from Milan. Since February 2020, the number of infections escalated to over 52,000 with over 900 deaths in August. In response to rising infections and deaths, the Nigerian government issued directives for lockdowns and social distancing in the three worst-hit states of Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja, the country's capital. State governors also issued total or partial lockdowns in their respective regions based on prevailing circumstances. However, lockdowns caused untold hardships for many Nigerians, due to the government's chaotic and lousy social welfare structures [10].

The Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and The Federal Ministry of Health have been at the forefront of efforts to combat COVID-19 in Nigeria. Both organizations have been active in setting up isolation centers, hospitals, and spaces to manage suspected and confirmed cases. The NCDC has also been engaged in training personnel and setting up rapid-response teams across Nigeria's 36 states [11]. However, despite efforts to combat the spread COVID-19, both organizations have been seriously challenged by a particular problem - the spread of misinformation or false information about COVID-19. The spread of misinformation has been described as the single biggest danger Nigeria faces in its fight against COVID-19. Misinformation has created public panic and is inhibiting efforts to stop the spread of the corona virus in Nigeria and across Africa [12].

2. The problem

As part of efforts to combat misinformation, NCDC periodically hosts daily press briefings to keep the press and the public up to date with its activities. These briefings are often broadcast live on the major national TV stations including the National Television Authority (NTA), Channels TV and African Independent Television (AIT). The NCDC has also teamed up with leading movie actors to produce public service messages on TV to debunk fake news and rumors about COVID-19. Besides, the NCDC has also teamed up with mobile network operators to send weekly SMS to Nigerians warning them on the dangers of misinformation. Through its social media pages on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, the NCDC regularly posts messages showing the daily number of confirmed cases, recoveries and deaths.

While existing efforts have mainly been focused on social media, SMS, TV and live media briefings, the potentials of radio in efforts to combat the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has been downplayed. Direct observation of twenty-five radio stations across Nigeria over a three-month period (March to May 2020), revealed the airing of only one radio advert titled '*Make you take responsibility*' directly sponsored by the NCDC. The one-minute advert produced in Nigerian pidgin, highlights the need for citizens to take responsibility for their safety through safe practices like hand washing, social distancing and not touching their faces.

There is still a strong need for the use of radio, Nigerian languages and town criers to ensure that correct information about COVID-19 reaches people, irrespective of their location or literacy level [13]. Radio is one of Nigeria's leading media channels, with a capacity to reach tens of millions daily. There is a need to employ radio in the disseminating of safe and accurate information about hand washing, social distancing and other safe practices to prevent the transmission of the corona virus in Nigeria [14].

3. Misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria

Misinformation is a term that describes the dissemination of false and inaccurate information. Examples of misinformation includes; rumor, spam, hoaxes, half-truths and fake news. Unlike the closely related term, disinformation; misinformation is often unintentionally propagated by its recipients. Recipients unintentionally spread misinformation merely due to existing trust for family members, friends, colleagues or influential users in their social media networks [15].

The growing spread of misinformation globally, has been attributed to the proliferation of the internet and digital media channels. More than half of the world is digitally connected. This new information ecosystem has created a fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of rumors, hoaxes and fake news.

Misinformation has a particular advantage over factual information. This advantage informs its rapid spread, compared to the latter. Misinformation is not constrained by reality. It is usually very appealing and attention grabbing. Misinformation is often more memorable than factual information [16].

Misinformation about COVID-19 has mostly proliferated through social media platforms, mainly in the form of rumors and conspiracy theories [17]. A notable example was that the corona virus was a biological weapon invented by China's for use against its enemies in a bid to become the main world power [18].

The rapid spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has been labeled an *infodemic* by the United Nations (UN). Misinformation has created public panic and led to dangerous practices which have worsened the spread of the corona virus and led to the loss of many lives in many countries [19]. Social media platforms constitute a serious threat to public health by allowing the promotion of medical fake news, which seriously puts lives at risk [20].

As in most countries, misinformation about COVID-19 has mostly circulated through social media channels in Nigeria. Social media is immensely popular in the country. Social media channels have provided citizens spaces for free expression with little or no government control [21]. With the proliferation of smart phones and lowering internet costs, Nigerian youths are increasingly participating in both national and international conversations. Sadly, these youths are also engaged in abetting the spread of rumors and other harmful content on social media platforms [22].

The first rumor about COVID-19 emerged in January 2020. The rumor held that it was impossible for the corona virus to reach Africa or even survive in Nigeria, due to the generally warm climate. Stories of natural shielding by nature were circulated mostly through WhatsApp [23]. By February, the rumor that black people were immune to COVID19 due to melanin in their skin, reached Nigeria from the USA. This rumor widely circulated through Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook. After news of the index case, another rumor emerged that COVID-19 could only affect rich and corrupt politicians, hence most poor Nigerians were safe from the virus [24]. At the same time were rumors that taking ample quantities of Vitamin C or bathing in warm water laced with ginger and garlic would kill the virus [25]. Several YouTube videos (all taken down) were made by pastors and several conspiracy theorists in Nigeria to promote these stories.

In April, the 5G theory emerged. This conspiracy theory held that 5G transmitters were responsible for the rapid escalation of COVID-19 infections in Europe and North America and were about to be installed across Africa. It was rumored that these transmitters will cause massive number of infections and deaths in Africa. At the forefront of promoting this conspiracy was Chris Oyakhilome the head pastor the Christ Embassy Church. In reaction, the UK government severely sanctioned his Loveworld News; a channel that broadcasts both from Nigeria and the UK [26].

The effects of misinformation took a serious toll in Nigeria. Several deaths and hospitalizations due to chloroquine overdose and food poisoning were reported. Many people with serious symptoms refused to turn themselves in to the NCDC, but rather preferred to manage treatment at home with phony herbal mixtures due to fear and stigma [27]. In Cross River State in South Eastern Nigeria, there was severe public panic as it was rumored that a nurse and a university student had already infected hundreds of people in Calabar the capital city. People became terrified and refused to step outside their homes for days. Businesses suffered [28].

4. Strategies for combating misinformation through radio

Radio has the power to promote citizen's resilience during periods of health crisis. Radio has the potential to influence opinions, change behavior and accurately inform the public about COVID-19 [29]. In order to effectively position radio to debunk misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria, several strategies could be employed.

Using credible sources is probably the first important step towards combating misinformation. UNESCO describes credible news sources as the best vaccine against COVID-19 [30]. These sources comprise of health experts directly working on treatment or limiting the spread of the virus. These experts have firsthand and factual knowledge. Radio stations need to contact and collaborate with the information departments of the NCDC, Federal Ministry of Health and other recognized health-based NGOs related to COVID-19. However, with lockdowns and social distancing, radio reporters have been impeded from physically visiting relevant locations. Investigative reporting during COVID-19 pandemic has become very difficult as reporters are fearful of getting infected. The NCDC has a dedicated website and pages on various social media channels including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram from where radio reporters could source verified information. The NCDC's social media pages are updated daily, showing the number of people infected, deaths and recoveries. These organizations also publish regular updates on how best to keep safe as well as news on ongoing efforts to find a cure against the virus. At regional levels, community radio stations could collaborate with their state government's COVID-19 task force, to obtain verified information on the state of the pandemic.

Broadcasting statistical updates at community level is another strategy. Similar to the NCDC's daily broadcasts on national TV, community radio stations across Nigeria could also broadcast their own daily statistical updates. These local broadcasts should be based on verified information and could appear as short items in the news, or in-between programs. Verified statistical figures help to minimize the spread of rumors and fears about the extent of infections. Statistics help to shape public understanding of COVID-19 by presenting figures that are factual and clear. Statistical updates via the media help health experts to carefully monitor likely infection hotspots around the country [31].

Radio jingles are tools which could be employed to tactically to combat misinformation. A jingle is a short musical advertisement of products or services. Jingles are also used in non-advertising contexts to share public service messages. Jingles work by transmitting sensory messages through sound [32]. When sound is well synchronized with the message, the listener easily remembers the message. Radio jingles are often employed by public health organizations to alert the public about the spread of diseases and to announce environmental cleanups [33]. Radio stations could produce and broadcast jingles to promote the need for sourcing verified information. Jingles could be produced to directly debunk rumors about COVID-19. However, it is recommended that message of the jingle be presented in simple

language, preferably, in an indigenous language or in Nigerian pidgin to enhance wider reach and better understanding due to the nature of the general populace.

Expert interviews provide great platforms for debunking misinformation through factual discourse. Radio stations could invite health experts and NGO officers directly working in COVID-19 portfolios for interviews during news broadcasts or talk shows. Interview questions could be designed to elicit responses on the current state of the pandemic and to address any misinformation. These expert interviews could feature call-in segments to allow listeners to directly pose questions to guests to clarify any doubts, rumors or misconceptions about COVID-19.

Combating misinformation is not an easy task. Radio stations will need to involve community. Radio stations could engage in community outreach activities that involve children and youths in efforts to stop the spread of misinformation. Children and youths are an important population group that needs to be protected in times of health pandemics. This group is also particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 if they have any underlying health conditions. Children and Youths have a strong information potential. However, due to their limited knowledge and experiences, children and youths are often engaged in spreading rumors in the playground and during discussions among peers. Radio stations need to tap into this potential by guiding the youths to channel their energies positively towards dispelling misinformation. For example, with the aid of appropriate sponsors, radio stations could organize poetry, essay or song writing competitions that will compel children and youths to do more research on the causes, symptoms, and safe practices of COVID-19. Through research, children and youths will gain a better understanding of COVID-19.

Dedicated segments during the news or program broadcasts are good avenues to dispel misinformation about COVID-19. Radio stations could dedicate ten to twenty percent of news time to informing listeners on the latest updates in the fight against the virus. Best practices for staying safe, could also be discussed in these segments. In Burkina Fasso for example, Radio Salaki dedicates the first five minutes at the beginning of each program to talk about COVID-19. During these dedicated segments, presenters talk about preventing transmission, symptoms and other important information [34]. Radio stations in Nigeria could emulate this strategy from Burkina Fasso.

Radio drama could also be employed as a tool in the fight against misinformation. Radio drama or radio play is a performance art that communicates through actors, music and sound effects. Radio drama is storytelling through sound [35]. Radio drama functions as a tool for entertaining and educating the public on various topical issues. An example could be producing a short drama or drama series to highlight the dangers unsafe practices as a result misinformation; something terrible happens to Mr./Mrs. X as a result of false information about COVID-19. Radio drama reflects what the public think about the corona virus. It helps to correct falsehood and highlight the importance of adhering to scientific fact.

5. Conclusion

Radio has strong potentials to reach ordinary citizens including people at the grass roots in Nigeria and across Africa. Radio remains a strong source for public information in times of health crisis. With widespread panic caused by misinformation about COVID-19, radio can play a huge role in combating the spread of false and misleading information.

This chapter advocates for the use of the traditional electronic medium of radio to tackle the menace of misinformation created and spread through social media

channels. Radio as a medium is not perfect, it has its shortcomings. However, unlike social media, radio has active gatekeepers; news editors that keep serious check on content before they are broadcast. The freedom, access and minimal gatekeeping of social media, make them particularly veritable spaces for spreading rumors and other falsehoods.

Radio stations need to recognize that they have an important role to play in the fight to minimize misinformation in Nigeria and across Africa. News and program content need to be carefully sourced and tailored to ensure that listeners in cities and at the grassroots, receive updated and accurate information about COVID-19. Government and private sector support are also necessary for radio to function effectively in Africa. Sadly, many radio stations are underfunded.

The strategies outlined this chapter, could be viewed as the author's modest contribution to supporting the battle against growing misinformation about COVID-19. It is hoped that these strategies will be seriously considered, tested and adopted by radio stations in Nigeria and across Africa.

This chapter is advisory and futuristic. It did not seek to measure the effects of radio on misinformation. The author relied on direct observation and consulted primary sources comprising newspaper websites and news blogs to gain verified information on the extents of misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria. Future studies might want to test these strategies qualitatively or quantitatively to support or refute them. For example, what are the effects of radio drama in minimizing misinformation about COVID-19? Do the public pay attention to expert interviews? It will also be interesting for future studies to consider other strategies for utilizing radio resources to combat misinformation beyond Nigerian and African contexts.

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