

SOCIAL MEDIA MISREPRESENTATION AND MISINFORMATION OF CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In this globalization era, social media is a powerful tool of propaganda and an invaluable system of disseminating information. It acts as a double edged sword thus; citizens received information without any hitch and it is also used to misinform people through circulation of unverified information together with misrepresentation of ideas. In lieu of this development, the question now becomes: to what extent do misinformation and misrepresentation on social media harm and create exceptional fear on the general public about covid-19 pandemic? This is a qualitative study which explored social media outlets such as Facebook: Whatsapp, Online Newspapers and Blogs where the thesis about the pandemic are well spelt out with consideration that they are the major forum used by many except World Health Organization (WHO) and the likes. Message from these forums have been randomly selected for analysis in this work. The researcher discovers that there are so many misinformation and misrepresentation of ideas in social media which majority of people / populace took very dearly because of the class of people involved and was quoted to have said it or/and posted them, therefore draw conclusion that it caused more harm on the citizenry than the pandemic itself. The World Health Organization (WHO) cautions that the proliferation of misinformation on social network sites might become deadlier than the virus itself (WHO 2020).

Keywords: Corona Virus, Misrepresentation and Misinformation, Social Media.

Introduction

The major tool that appeared for the purpose of information dissemination is internet, the media however acts as information hegemony in condition of determining what information is made available to people alongside the impression people have on issues as Savrum and Leon assert (13-34). More so, it is the collection of websites and web-based systems that give way for mass interaction, conversation and sharing among members of a network as Murphy opines (3). These outlets and communication networks perform important function in motivating role outs which its power lies in live pictures and video clips as events unfolds. Furthermore, it has recreated an important role in weakening undemocratic regime in governance. The international live streaming of events is also capable of organizing a large population of people misinformed or otherwise. Unfortunately these various outlets that have played all these important roles have been abused by conscienceless people who hide under its anonymity to do all sorts of uncivilized things or misinforming the general public during this emergency period of pandemic and general lock down.

The novel severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome - Corona virus 2 (SARS-COV 2) and its sister corona virus disease 2019 that resulted in a pandemic of viral respiratory failure, originated from the Human Seafood Market at Wuhan, China in December, 2019; according to Shereen (91-98), and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11th March, 2020. The virus, since its identification is said to have accounted for several deaths universally. So many countries have tried to handle this outbreak through the use of some ethical measured

like; physical contact reduction, wearing of nose mask, avoiding public gathering etc for daily living. This upon social media platforms such under study to stay connected for work, education like zoom and Microsoft Team have also exponential growth in their usage this period. Having such drastic measures in place to curtail the spread of the virus, it becomes imperative that social media is now appropriately utilized to maximize its advantages to the workforce and education as well as its accompanied limitations.

Social media become varying means of communication and other engagements both by the government and the general public. In contrary, it has also been utilized as a means of disseminating news, information and presentations which are most at times based on assumption and speculation that often result to misinformation and misrepresentation which give rise to this study. This study then intends to x-ray misinformation and misinterpretation of social media as tool for the spread of fake messages to instigate panic. Further, the researcher will examine the role of the social media from the point of misinformation and misrepresentation by several citizens across various social media platforms as citizens believed wholly because it came from the social media. It will further represent this in line of the fact that social media have begun to serve wrong purpose which has been manipulated by the members of the public and to deal with it as it causes more harm than expected good.

With the wide adoption of social media, the information ecosystem has seen large changes. Peer-to-peer communication can greatly amplify fake or misleading information by any individual according to Vosoughi et al, (2018). Many studies reported the presence of misinformation on social media during the time of epidemic like Ebola thus; Fung et al, (2016); Jin et al (2014); Pathak et al (2015), Sell et al (2020); Bora et al (2018); Seltzer et al (2017); Sharma et al (2017) and Wood (2018). Misinformation surrounding vaccines has been particularly persistent and is likely to reoccur whenever the topic comes into public focus, Bahk et al, (2016); DeVerna et al (2021); Donzelli et al, (2018); Mahoney et al, (2015); Panatto et al, (2018) and Schmidt et al (2018).

These studies focused on specific social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and You Tube. The most common approach was content –based analysis of sampled social media posts, images and videos to gauge the topics of online discussions and estimate the prevalence of misinformation. This study is to fill the gap of misinformation and misrepresentation of social media during corona virus pandemic in Nigeria.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE MISINFORMATION

Misinformation is defined as explicitly false information according to what is considered to be incorrect by expert consensus, excluding rumors, contradictory or contested information, exaggeration or preliminary health findings. Wardle and Derakhshan , (2017) note that false information which is being shared unconsciously and without any purpose to make harm to anyone is referred to as misinformation; on the other hand, disinformation is false information shared consciously to make harm intentionally. Misinformation is false information which is both deliberately promoted and accidentally shared according to Southwell et al, (2018). As a phenomenon that can quickly spread through a range of media and communication channels, misinformation has become a focus for research and debates across disciplines and topical domains that provide valuable insights into how people are misinformed about health and health related issues and how it affects individual and /or public perceptions as opine Jewit,

(2012). From existing literature, evidence has affirmed that the predominance and perseverance of misinformation can have societal consequences as Bode, (2018) asserts.

The issue of health misinformation however, is a long-running battle in Nigeria. Going back, during Ebola epidemic in 2014, so many misinformation and misrepresentation spread around the country. This includes advice from the Atta of Igala, that bathing with salt water could stop one from contracting the disease, according to Adebimpe et al, (2015). This false information led to too much death aside the pandemic itself.

Social Media Amplifier of Misinformation and Misrepresentation During Corona Virus Pandemic

The arrival of social media and the users' ability to generate their choice of content have increased the incidence of misinformation and misrepresentation. Fake news and misinformation have been widely observed to be an increasing apparent threat to global health. During epidemic such as corona virus, the public receives information overload through social media which are most at times misinform or misrepresent. Although fake news is not a novel act, it has recently attracted immeasurable attention because of the popularity of social media for interaction and for the diffusion of news and ideas as Idayet, (2020) opines. Social media can be said to be the livewire of fake news, since it permits a person to share unverified news or stories among the populace with just a click.

It has been generally observed that the controlled dissemination of information through the social media is no longer the ultimate goal to any health organization or government because of the proliferation of social media platforms. Initially, these platforms were created to bring humans together not otherwise.

Social Media as a means of Information Dissemination

Nigeria as a country has over 250 ethnic groups together with their languages which have recorded several years of military rules. In 1999 military turned civilian leader gave birth to new dawn of democracy with General Olusegun Obasanjo as a democratic president. As part of his process of redeeming the image of Nigeria that was abused and kept in shamble under the military rule he introduced a telecommunication policy that empowered the Nigerian communication company to issue fresh license to companies they deem successful to provide Nigerians an efficient as well as affordable telephone system. This move was aimed at eradicating the problems of landlines that was being used by the wealthy citizens. Several companies were given license and given automation to start operation within (50 days) 3 months. As years go many people were in possession of smart phones which led to healthy competitions among the various service providers.

Then during pandemic under study social media provided huge service as information outlet to Nigerians. The first corona virus victim was made known to the public through various social media – Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter and various websites. Because a good number of the citizenry have access to these platforms, information was very easy to disseminate. Again, Health Care Agencies such as NCDC used social media to update the populace on the number of cases that are positive, fatal and or have recovered. This gave the masses a better understanding and to be fully prepared for the pandemic as against the previous of the influenza pandemic that did not experience vast social media coverage when it hits Nigeria.

In this period of corona virus pandemic however, it was through the media that government passes across updates on the level of country's Health as regards the spread of the virus. Service providers like MTN provided free internet access to the websites of Health Organizations like

the NCDC, Federal ministry of health as well prudential task force. These Health Agents also send sms updates to the people daily to keep citizens on the known and equip them with whatever information needed to fight the virus. Again possession of android phones and data had caused a number of harm to the country as citizenry hide under its anonymity to commit varying crimes. This made the government to mandate sim card registration by different network providers within the country, to make tracking of fraudster possible. Yet with all these measures, fraudsters with intent to spread falsehood, half-truth, and panic still predominate the social media.

Some Social Media Misinformation and Misrepresentations of Corona virus

Covid-19 is a chemical weapon and many people contracted it through testing. The vaccine that is coming for it carries the actual virus and anybody vaccinated, have short time to live and die. Also, it will contain signal that control the human being and connects it to the power base of the world leaders. It will inform them where you are and of whether or not you are of virus free.

The 5th generation Network (5G) of mobile technology of wireless communication supporting cellular data networks with increased performance and a wide range of applications was also attributed to the virus. World Health Organization (WHO) refuted the theory say that this technology has nothing to do with the virus and further reveal that after their investigation, the virus cannot travel on wire/radio waves or mobile network- WHO (2020). Some of the proponents of these theories include some reputed religious leaders – highly influential leaders of the believers love world ministry who claims that the virus is used as a play to install the 5G network. Also, he claims that ‘the government installed the lockdown policy, to enable them implement the installation of the network which he attribute to as being Anti-Christ’ according to Adelaku (2020a), because Nigerians are too religious, they easily take whatever their religious leaders say.

Furthermore, the overseer of Omega fire ministry highlights that covid-19 is an experiment and that People’s Republic of China is now rejoicing because they have shaken the globe. Other such misinformed messages are:

‘I address you today as the globe is shaking; the kings and rulers of the earth have now known that they are but mere men. Now, come to think of it, “a mere virus” and the whole world are in a panic mode. Just a virus and businesses are shutting down while streets of big cities are empty. Just “a virus” and citizens of nations cannot move around the way they wish to and all flights from Europe to America to Africa are shut down.

Developed nations are being threatened without bombs. Educational institutions and entertainment centres are closed, religious cities like churches, announced that there will be no services until further notice. And the world market is collapsing and nations are entering into recession with speed. ‘If ordinary ‘virus’ could do all these, then imagine what will be on this earth, the day Jesus Christ will come... please do it now and be saved, share urgently and save a soul from hell and free your hand from their blood’. These kinds of posts instill panic and fear to the naïve wherein fanatic born-again reject pre-cautions as they believe that the end is at hand and Anti- Christ is revealed.

Another misrepresentation is that Nigerian government embarked on a project to bring in a medical team from China, they shed light on the reasons for their intervention solely on how

the pandemic was tackled effectively in their country-China. According to the Director-General of the National Orientation Agency, “Whatever information the Chinese medical team made available to us will be filtered and applied to address the peculiar challenges of the country in handling the covid-19 courage” Premium Times (2020, 9th April). This however, sparked outrage from the Nigerian Medical Association especially the president of the organization who in his description regarded the action as a misplaced priority and a thing of embarrassment to them and a slap to their faces because the government undermined their competency which made them reject reasons for the acceptance of Chinese personnel into the country.

Furthermore, some Nigerians perceived the news on this government project from a very different perspective as a conspiracy on the Chinese people utilization of the virus to decimate our population. Here are typical instance:

Please my fellow Nigerians... stay away from all the covid-19 kits sent agent called Jack ma... It already arrived NMA since Monday through Ethiopian airline and / heard it was moved to Abuja for distribution... WhatsApp broadcast message by Nigerians on the presence of the Chinese in the country; Please don't get close to them in the name of God you serve. I beg all of you their mission is to reduce the population of Nigeria and still make money from it. Those kits from China are the real corona virus. China supplies two million masks for Africa. The most suspicious is that the (WHO) World Health Organization says that Africa must prepare for the worst. My advice is as thus; wherever you are if they distribute the masks, please do not take them. These are infected brands, save lives. Share to all please.

Again, this message still runs on Whatsapp as populace highly believe that the Chinese government is responsible for the increment of infected individuals in other countries, thus, have become Bent on spreading the information to Nigerians to refuse medication from them. More misrepresentation of president Trump's statement:

... as soon as president Trump mentioned that chloroquine anti malaria drugs may be helpful in treating covid-19 victims, many Nigerians consumed an overdose of it in some part of the country and were hospitalized, some even went far away as buying a whole lot of it to stock in their homes. It was recorded that the massive consumption of chloroquine to fight the covid-19 was as result of misinformation.

Nigerians are so religious, due to difficult situations/conditions of livelihood in the country that made the common man lack essential commodities; they have recourse in the Bible and all the teachings of their pastors. They reverence their men of God “Gos” whose words are seen as final and as such consumed hook, line and sinker without critical reasoning. If found contrary being critical to the pastor's view you become anathema. This makes some people manipulate the sensibilities of Nigerians by defrauding and spreading fake news in the name of men of God especially the prominent ones among them.

In the south eastern part of this country a famous Catholic Priest – Rev Fr. Mbaka was credited to have advised people to check for a strand of hair in their Bible and use it to bath and/or wash their face as a solution to the covid-19 pandemic which he refuted vehemently as a false information against him and encouraged people always adhere to all precautionary measures given by the government and WHO.

The fundamental issue with misinformation and its sister is that once people have heard of it, they tend to believe and act on them, even after it's been corrected. Even in the best of all possible worlds, correcting misinformation and misrepresentation is not an easy task. Even after it has been corrected, false beliefs can still hold.

Method of Data Collection

This study investigates the social media misinformation and misrepresentation of covid-19 pandemic, the researcher documents the misinformation and misrepresentation on the spread and effect of the pandemic. The researcher made use of field survey method by obtaining general / public information and representations of the local through primary survey. The data for this study were collected also through secondary sources.

Data Presentation & Analysis

The study was carried out to investigate misinformation and misrepresentations of social media during corona virus pandemic in Africa: Nigeria example. Three research questions were used and the findings were analyzed to answer the questions.

The following are data for this study"; (Whatsapp retrieval March, 25 to April, 8, 2020).

1. Please fellow Nigerians.... Stay away from all the covid-19 kits sent from China government through their agents called Jack...
2. Whatever information the Chinese medical team made available to us will be filtered and applied to address the peculiar challenges of the country in handling the covid-19 scourge.
3. I address you today as the globe is shaking; the kings and rulers of the earth have now known that they are but mere men.
4. As soon as president Trump mentioned that chloroquine anti malaria drugs may be helpful in treating covid-19 victims, many Nigerians consumed an overdoses of it.
5. ... Bath or wash their face as a solution to the covid-19 pandemic with serve part of the Bible.
6. ... Some church have also devised conspiracy theories about it, the world & church in making out the pandemic as a fight against the church.
7. The 5G network is the agent of the virus, pastor Claim that the virus is used as a many to install the 5G network. ... it is attributed to anti-Christ.
8. Covid-19 is a chemical weapon & may people contracted it through testing. The coming vaccine carries the actual disease...
9. ... It a means of steadying news tilting to rapture & the end of the world according to neutration.
10. ... If you notice any sign as itching in the throat, pry throat & pry caught quickly take hot water and drink garlic.

Analysis

From the above data it is clear that the wage of social media platforms for (mis) information is evident amongst the citizenry. These information that are passed across are mostly assumptions cum specialization which are disseminated to spread panic to other members / citizenry.

The above data are instances to many other social media misinformation to citizenry and further enjoin the receiver to endeavor to press on the message. From the data it was also clear that religious practices and prominent religious leaders influenced social media misinformation and misrepresentation of corona virus pandemic in Nigeria.

Conclusion

However, when social media (misinform and misrepresent) is wrongly used, the misinformed fall easily prey to misinformation that primarily / finally bring mishap and confusion as a fear to the public. Proceeding to the covid-19 pandemic was Ebola virus in 2014. At that time social media was so much used to circulate false/fake news and unreliable information such as bathing with salt water, bitter kola etc in a bid to prevent contagious disease, Adebimpe (2015). So many went as far as drinking salt water as a preventive measure against the disease but turned disastrous to people unfortunately.

The same experience is also being recorded in the era of covid-19 as social media users are asked to forward and re-forward messages unverified. Dimoggio (2001) notes that the re-broadcasting of news prompts and engages the public in terms of the economic and psychological effect that come with such messages and serves as an antidotes to anomic mass communication. Also, it induces a wider reaction with the people than the old-forms of communication to their detriment.

Recommendations

1. The researcher recommends that government should put some measure in place in order to sanction religious leaders or individuals with numerous followers when they misinform and misrepresent teachings to the masses.
2. It is prime importance that social media users / providers should monitor the information exchange for quality and reliability to reduce misinformation and misrepresentation to the lowest minimum.
3. Government should also pay more attention to the social media interaction among the citizenry and treat accordingly whoever misinforms the public on any sensitive matter.
4. Finally, there is need to instill regulations on the use of social media through modern technological innovations to verify any information on social media.

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