THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INFORMATION DISSEMINATION IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

QUADRI, MONSURU OMOTAYO
Principal Librarian,
quadri_monsur2007@yahoo.com

OLUWASINA, OYESOLA OYETUNJI
Senior Librarian,
Oluwasina70@gmail.com
&
ADEBIYI, ADEBANJO
Librarian 1,
Gbenga Daniel Library,
Tai- Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria
adebiyiao@tasued.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social media in information dissemination in the pandemic era. Social Media is an invaluable means of disseminating information to the citizenry; hence it is a powerful tool of propaganda. The paper therefore interrogates the roles which social media play in either curtailing or aiding the spread of the news on the pandemic across the country. The paper concludes that the relevance of social media outlets cannot be overemphasized with recourse to information dissemination. Therefore, the study recommends that social media users should stop spreading fake news and inflammatory messages that may result in violence, fear and confusion of individual health status. Furthermore, government should collaborate with security agencies to monitor social media accounts so as to counter propaganda, hate speech and other hazardous contents.

Keyword: Social media, Information dissemination, COVID-19, Pandemic era.

Introduction

Broadly speaking, knowledge is power. The spread of social media, driven by internet boom and mobile technology is changing the way society operates. For the past couple of decades, the two main screens have been the Television screen and the computer screen. These days a host of smaller screens have joined the line-up; the screen on a cell phone, Ipod or Ipad (Ungerer, 2012). The emergence of the small screen has encouraged the emergence of new trends; mass media have become increasingly mobile. The emergence and use of wireless laptops and cell phones are the current trend that has taken the world by storm, best known as "social media". These simply are online communications that use special techniques that involve participation, conversation, sharing, collaboration, and linkage. Today, social media tools have become a staple in the everyday lives of many people becoming one of the main methods of social connection and interaction around the world, whether between individuals, or with businesses and governments.

The Role of Social Media in Information Dissemination in the Pandemic Era

The growth of Web 2.0, its expanding global reach and potential new technologies to further its use and adoption argue that today's social networking is a change in the form of human communication that cannot be ignored. Online social networks have impacted every field of human endeavor from education to health care and many more. This media outlet accommodates a wide variety spontaneous, formal, informal, scholarly and unscholarly writings to flourish. The impact of social media network is evolving rapidly. It is altering the way people connect, create, store, share and respond to information. More so, it is transforming traditional news media to a more interactive and inter-activity media, where audience can supply, comment, discuss and even further distribute the news. In addition, the power of social media lies in its capability to create highly effective platforms, where people can engage and communicate freely anywhere, any time and in real-time as well as in a global scale. Social media has evolved as machinery for building reputation, hiring workforce, generating revenue and gaining customers' confidence (Chadwish, 2006).

In the era of COVID-19, social media is a great medium for individuals and communities to stay connected even while physically separated. In December 2019, a new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) emerged, sparking an epidemic of acute respiratory syndrome (COVID-19) in humans, centred in Wuhan, China (Zhou, Ruan, Huang, 2020). Within three months, the virus had spread to more than 118,000 cases and caused 4, 291 deaths in 114 countries, leading the World Health Organization to declare a global pandemic. The pandemic has led to a massive global public health campaign to slow the spread of the virus by increasing hand washing, reducing face touching, wearing masks in public and physical distancing. COVID-19 is a serious global pandemic with more than 1 million confirmed cases and 64,000 deaths (JHU, 2020). While about 97–99% of individuals infected with coronavirus recover (New York Times, 2020), a high proportion of cases require hospitalization, and people over 65 and those with some underlying medical conditions experience higher mortality. As the virus spreads, the pandemic has the potential to quickly overwhelm health systems. While cases are currently concentrated in Europe, East Asia, and the Americas, the pandemic now spans 183 countries. The potential impact in countries in the Caribbean, Africa, and Southern Asia, which may have lower-capacity health systems and large vulnerable populations, is still unknown. Appropriate precautions and mitigation strategies must be developed and implemented across all public health sectors to prevent potentially devastating outcomes. As it disrupts health systems and affects human health globally, it is crucial to protect those most impacted by COVID-19, sustain gains made to address other infectious diseases, and maintain people's access to life-saving health services.

The world has experienced varying pandemics in the past from the Antonine plague (165 AD), the Black death (1346–1354), the Spanish flu (1918–1920), the Asian Flu (1956–1958) among others. The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent phenomenon and its study is still limited. To this end, the literatures used in the analysis of this research are largely materials conducted on other pandemics which have affected the world. In the light of the above, research conducted on the above pandemics have been used to draw parallels with the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, works on social media and its influence as a tool of information dissemination are similarly reviewed. Elmahdawy et al. (2017) investigated the experiences of the victims of Ebola virus as it pertained to health systems and the effects this virus had on economies of African countries. The authors canvassed for the revamping of the healthcare systems of Third World countries, militated against by inadequate information sharing systems and the need to involve donor agencies to curb the virus spread in case of a relapse occurs. Unfortunately, Africa was still gasping from Ebola virus when the Coronavirus pandemic once more exposed further several deficiencies in Africa's primary health care systems; which had been railing from poor funding by narrow-minded leaders who prefer medical tourism abroad to fixing basic primary health care infrastructure in the continent.

Additionally, Oleribe et al. (2015) emphasized that African countries were unprepared to tackle

the outbreak of Ebola virus just as with the case of COVID-19. In Nigeria, there was no preemptive closure of borders until the index Italian case forces panic stringent lockdown of the major epicenters of Lagos and Abuja. This led to the shutdown of educational institutions and prompted delays in programs such as the National Youth Service Corps. Consequently, there was a massive mobilization, awareness creation and sensitization of the citizenry to the dangers, symptoms and signs of the virus. The unintended outcome of coronavirus pandemic was the special emphasis on hygiene and sanitization. In their own research endeavor, Cenciarelli et al. (2015) analyzed the wide spread of the Ebola Virus disease in the different West African countries. They attributed the spread of the virus to the reactions of several communities to the virus due to the mistaken beliefs about the origin of the disease and how it could be contained as a result of wrong information which increased the mortality rates during the pandemic (Cenciarelli et al., 2015). In Nigeria, where a good number of citizens believe that the virus is a hoax created by the government to corruptly enrich few State officials. This belief is difficult to erase from the minds of many people, thus making almost impossible to adhere to personal hygiene instructions issued by both the WHO and the Nigeria Centre for Diseases Control (NCDC).

Many scientific journals have allowed open access for most manuscripts on COVID-19. For health professionals, this may be adequate. However, for the general population, this has no impact on raising awareness. These days, people are overwhelmed by the information they receive on their Smartphone's through platforms such as *Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube* and *Instagram*. The biggest problem is in determining which news to trust. Even a pandemic can be used as a political battle, where some will recommend social isolation while others recommend doing nothing that will stop the economy. Who is right, the ones who recommend chloroquine or those who tell you to take your antipyretic medicine and stay home if you have mild symptoms? It is not uncommon to see hundreds of daily texts, videos and even scientific publications in social media groups defending each argument.

The Usage and Influences of Social Media during

Invariably, the society is living not just in a pandemic, but also in an "infodemic" where fake news is becoming more common. These messages and texts always start the same way: they feature a physician, nurse, surgeon, or other authority figure, who shares advice such as holding your breath as a COVID-19 confirmation test, or taking vitamins to decrease the possibility of infection (Llewellyn, 2020). It is understandable that everybody wants to protect his or her families and friends and that the lack of answers regarding this new disease increases the level of anxiety in society. It seems as though evidence of the highest level is not as important as social media experts' texts that are broadly shared on the Internet. Fake news also leads to racism and xenophobia toward Chinese people (Shimizu, 2020). In Japan, discrimination against Chinese nationals has become widespread: visitors from China have been called bioterrorists, dirty, and insensitive. Fake news has led desperate Japanese people to besiege pharmacies to buy surgical masks. In Brazil, a similar phenomenon took place with chloroquine, even though scientific studies showed no clear benefits of the use of the drug to treat the COVID-19 infection (Merchant & Lurie, 2020). It is almost impossible to log in to your social media accounts and not see a suspect text or message on any of these topics.

More so, DiMaggio (2011) admits that the Internet changes society and this is supported by Bowd (2016) who posits that the advent of social media came with opportunities for news outlets to engage more people thereby leading to an increased spread of information to a wider audience. Meanwhile the research conducted by Oginni and Motui (2015) analyzes the engagements of Africans with the social media. These scholars assert that the engagement of Africans with social media is relatively low and that authors did not fully explore the impacts of social media usage for civic

engagements in individual countries or sub-regions of the African continent. To this end, the pandemic has made Africans, specifically Nigerians to be more active in social media in order to keep up with the global sphere. In a nutshell, while the patterns as to what caused the spread of previous pandemics are still being fully underscored, the measures adopted by the government and by the populace to curtail the pandemic and its challenges were identified by the above researchers, but little attention have been given to the role of social media vis-à-vis global pandemics. In the Nigerian context, social media is a means of keeping up with occurrences all over the globe and is used to shed light as regards the Nigerian situation. The penetration of social media is quite extensive in Nigeria particularly since the advent of cheap android smartphones telephony. What is worrisome is how to sieve authentic information from an avalanche of half-truths and false information available on social media networks.

However, this work examines the role of the social media from the context of disseminating information. The research explores the misinterpretation of the social media by several citizens across various social media platforms, with instances cited to buttress the assertions as the notions are shared by most because it came from the social media. This research depicts this in line of the fact that social media have begun to serve wrong purposes which has been induced by the populace and suggestions are made on how to curb the menace that the wrong usage is gradually instigating. The COVID-19 and the lockdown policies introduced by the government made people to be solely dependent on the media, thus the influence the media had during this period have not been attained in any other pandemic. The populace has not fully understood the extent to which they are influenced by the news spread by the social media, which happens mostly unconsciously. Thus this study intends to make an exposé on the role which social media plays, most especially in inducing fear among the citizenry. It is this "panic button" being promoted by social media that this research attempts to highlight in the light of coronavirus pandemic.

Social Media Information Security

To enable effective social media application towards business processes especially in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, several factors need to be considered before investing in such significant addition. There is a heavy emphasize regarding information to be secured and free from unauthorized access. The term information security, in the opinion of (Talwar, Talwar, Kaur, Tripathy, & Dhir, 2020), is characterised as information conservation and its support components comprising of the hardware and systems being used to manage and transfer the information. Companies and organisations now have becoming vulnerable everyday due to threats in security, both internally and externally. Increasing threat in social media crime has raised the application for a better information security. It has become vital for companies and users to safeguard important information from external threats as the attacks have now become more sophisticated. Although, since application of information security is mandatory in most government and business sector and its importance has been highlighted, the ease of use of this system software was not fully recognised. Companies and organisations' concern in protection against security attack have overshadowed the ease of use for employees to a point that it becomes difficult to use.

It is vital for senior managers and middle level management to understand the adoption and the ease of use and compliance of information security measure. Physical information security as well as training of employees in policies and practices needs to fully be realised and communicated throughout the organisation. Managers play an active role in developing strategy and support in training to show positive influence towards acceptance on the implementation of security software (Laato, Islam, Farooq, Dhir, 2020). Nowadays, in this technology era, businesses all over the world rely on some form of technology, i.e., social media, digital communication or services to conduct day-

to-day business, which include websites, online finance (banking), interaction with customers (marketing, social media, shopping). Organisation in different forms, majority consist of businesses has experienced breached or attacked. Furthermore, according to IBM Security and Ponemon Institute on a survey that was released (2018 Cost of Data Breach Study: Global Overview), over 477 companies from 15 different countries and regions have experience data breach over the past 12 months. The average cost of data breach has totalled to USD 3.86 million and the average size of data breaches increased by 2.2 percent. The probability of material breach in the next 24 months will average to 27.9 percent and South Africa has the highest probability of data breach, averaging to about 43 percent. Companies and organization that utilized third party involvement to secure data will incur up to USD 13 per compromised records for an adjusted cost of USD 161, up from USD 148 per record. Efforts for a major could migration during the breach will incur a cost of USD 12 per capita cost, for an average of USD 160, up from USD 148 per record by IBM Security & Ponemon Institute LLC.

Social Media in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Social media has not only been a platform for news and information dissemination, but has proved also a means of spreading panic, fear and confusion by the people to the people despite having been warned by the NCDC not to indulge in social media abuse through spreading misinformation (NCDC, 2020). This is largely because the use of social media is permissible to all and sundry, hence unverified and fake news can be passed on without fear or favor. Savrum and Leon (2015) explain it thus, "The media provide a freedom of choice and individuals are free to choose which broadcast best represents their interest." They further posit that the media exacerbates social issues thereby heightening negative impressions on these situations (Savrum & Leon, 2015). AlSayyad and Guvenc (2015) in their analysis of the role of social media to the success of the Arab Spring revolution interviewed Gigi Ibrahim, an Egyptian tweeter, who said that:

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are very important. They can spread mass amounts of information … communication is key here. But at the end of the day, if people don't decide to go to the streets … nothing will happen (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015).

In Yemeni, when government banned Al Jazeera from covering events in the country, social media became an easy outlet used for several activities. The Arab Spring uprising introduced social media to Yemen as online meetings were organized in close Facebook groups and news spread through blog and YouTube channels (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015). In view of the above assertions, the advantages of social media cannot be too stressed as it crippled unpopular regimes and opened spaces for people to express their grievances albeit via virtual public spaces. However, when social media is negatively deployed, the uninformed easily fall prey to misinformation which at times brings mishap and confusion to the populace. Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Ebola Virus in 2014 majorly affected the citizens of West Africa. Nigerians at the time used social media for the circulation of fake and unreliable news. The period saw several broadcasts made all over _WhatsApp, Facebook,_ and the likes with unverified medical information such as bathing with salt water, bitter cola and antibiotics in a bid to prevent contagious diseases (Adebimpe, Adeyemi, Faremi, Ojo, & Efuntoye, 2015).

Some citizens also went as far as drinking salt water as preventive measures against the Ebola disease. Unfortunately, this turned out to be deleterious to people who engaged in this as some met their untimely demise. As of late, the same trend as experienced during the Ebola period is evident in the Coronavirus pandemic; as social media users are asked to forward reoccurring broadcast messages. DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson, (2001) note that the re-broadcasting of news prompts and engages the public in terms of the economic and psychological effect that comes with

such messages, and that this serves as an antidote to anomic mass communication. It also induces a wider reaction or engagement with the people than the old-fashioned means of communication, albeit to their disadvantage, as such, people readily forward the messages in a bid to spread awareness. Below is an excerpt from a broadcast message on WhatsApp sent on the 25th of March 2020 on ways to curtail COVID-19.

"How do you know if you have Corona Virus?"

1.   Itching in the throat
2.   Dry throat
3.   Dry Cough

So, if you notice any of these three things, quickly take hot water and drink plus garlic. Note that it takes like two weeks for this virus to penetrate your whole body, with this initial remedy of garlic and hot water kills it. Do not keep this information to yourself pass on to all your family and friends. God bless you (WhatsApp Communication, 2020). Nigerians are very religious people and because of the difficult situations in the country, where the common man lacks the essential basics of life, they find succor in the Bible and in the teachings of their pastors. They revere their "men of God" whose words are consumed without critical reasoning. Any contrary view to what the "men of God" say becomes tantamount to blasphemy. Some people manipulate the sensibilities of Nigerians by defrauding and spreading fake news in the name of these "men of God," especially the prominent ones among them. In the Southeastern part of the country a revered Catholic priest Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka was credited to have encouraged people to check for a strand of hair in their Bible and use it to bath or wash their face as a solution to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like the Ebola salt saga, people frantically searched their bibles for a strand of hair while concerned relatives started calling their loved ones to adhere to the message. The revered priest announced in most Nigerian national dailies and radio stations that these messages were fake. He further encouraged people to adhere strictly to WHO instructions (Ede, 2020; Olowolagba, 2020). When the Reverend Priest debunked this information, people turned around and credited the information to the Pope in order to garner legitimacy. To this end, social media platforms have become a front in the spread of information about the virus from the religious perspective. The virus has not only been ascribed to a lot of views but also the correlation between the virus and several other phenomena have been made. Some churches have also devised conspiracy theories about the state, the world and the church, suddenly marking out the pandemic as a fight against the church; a clear instance being the attribution of the virus to the recent technological advancement, 5G network.

Conclusion

In recent times, social media platforms are prompt and efficient in keeping up with dialogues surrounding the pandemic and this is not streamline to Nigeria alone. Through the same media, information is rectified and verified by the right sources. It therefore becomes essential to debunk fake news, mis-information and to educate people on the need to be cautious in forwarding unverifiable news and in consuming every information they get from the internet as a blueprint for their reactions. People are also advised to conduct personal researches from verifiable sources and authentic online accounts such as the National Orientation Agency and NCDC; so as not to fall prey to disinformation on varying social media outlets.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are as follows:

1.   Governments and healthcare authorities should use social media to spread updates, news, and scientific discoveries about COVID-19.
2.   Information from reliable sources such as government healthcare authorities and specialists

should be trusted.

3. Unreliable information should not be circulated before evaluating the sources and their conflicts of interest.

4. Indeed, social media on the one hand is a good tool for dissemination of knowledge while on the other hand, it could be destructive, and divisive when it falls to the hands of mischief makers, thus there is need to checkmate users.

5. Finally, health workers intending to use social media must ensure that professional interactions between/among other health care professionals, including the transmission of any health data, satisfy the local policy or legislation.

REFERENCES

Adebimpe, W. O., Adeyemi, D. H., Faremi, A., Ojo, J. O., & Efuntoye, A. E. (2015). The relevance of the social networking media in Ebola virus disease prevention and control in Southwestern Nigeria. _Pan African Medical Journal_, _22_(Supp 1); 7.

AlSayyad, N., & Guvenc, M. (2015). Virtual uprisings: On the interaction of new social media, traditional media coverage and urban space during the 'Arab Spring'. _Urban Studies, 52_(11); 2018–2034.

Bowd, K. (2016). Social media and news media: Building new publics or fragmenting audience. In M. Griffiths & K. Barbour (Eds.). _Making Public, Making Spaces_ (pp. 129-144). University of Adelaide Press.

Chadwish, A. (2006). _Internet Politics: States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies_. NY: Oxford University Press, p.11.

Chan, A. K. M., Nickson, C. P., Rudolph, J. W., Lee, A., & Joynt, G. M. (2020). Social media for rapid knowledge dissemination: early experience from the COVID-19 pandemic. _Anaesthesia_. 2020.

DiMaggio, P. (2011). Social Implications of the Internet. _Annual Review of Sociology, 27;_ 307-336.

DiMaggio, P., Hargittai, E., Neuman, W. R., & Robinson, J. P. (2001). Social implications of the Internet. _Annual Review of Sociology, 27_(1); 307–336.

Ede, R. (2020). Mbaka denies report on COVID-19, solution. Punch Newspaper.

Gough, A., Hunter, R. F., Ajao, O., Jurek, A., McKeown, G., & Hong, J. (2017). Tweet for behavior change: using social media for the dissemination of public health messages. _JMIR Public Health Surveillance, 3_(1); e14.

JHU, (2020). JHU Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at John Hopkins University.

Laato, S., Islam, A. N., Farooq, A., & Dhir, A. (2020). Unusual purchasing behavior during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: The stimulus-organism-response approach. _Journal of Retail and Consumer Service, 57;_ 102224.

Llewellyn, S. (2020). COVID-19: how to be careful with trust and expertise on social media. _Bio Medical Journal_, 368; m1160..

Merchant, R. M., & Lurie, N. (2020). Social media and emergency preparedness in response to novel Coronavirus. _JAMA_. 2020.

NCDC. (2020). Twitter @NCDCgov. Retrieved 14 July, 2020.

New York Times (2020). Based on 1-3% COVID-19 mortality. Coronavirus death rate in Wuhan is lower than previously thought, study finds.

Oginni, S. O., & Motui, J. N. (2015). Social media and public policy process in Africa: Enhanced policy process in digital age, consilience. _The Journal of Sustainable Development, 14_(2); 158-172.

Olowolagba, F. (2020). COVID 19: Fr. Mbaka makes clarifications on use of strands of hair in the Bible to cure Coronavirus. Daily Post Newspaper.

Savrum, Y. M., & Leon, M. (2015). The role of the media in conflict, peace building and international relations. _International Journal on World Peace, 32_(4); 13–34.

Shimizu, K. (2020). 2019-nCoV, fake news, and racism. _Lancet_, _395_(10225); 685-6.

Talwar, M., Talwar, S., Kaur, P., Tripathy, N., & Dhir, A. (2020). Has financial attitude impacted the trading activity of retail investors during the COVID-19 pandemic? _Journal of Retail and Consumer Service, 58_, 102341.

Ungerer, C. (2012). Social media and national security. _ASPI Strategic Policy Form_, 27 February.P.1.

Zhou, L, Ruan, F., & Huang, M. (2020). SARS-CoV-2 viral load in upper respiratory specimens of infected patients. _New England Journal of Medicine._

Monsuru, Omotayo (CLN) is a qualified Librarian. He had his Master Degree in Library and information Science from University of Ibadan. He is presently a Principal Librarian and Head of Serial Section at Gbenga Daniel Library (TASUED). He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. programme at University of Ibadan.

Oluwasina, Oyesola Oyetunji (CLN), currently works at Tai Solarin University of Education as Senior Librarian and is the Head of Collection Development of the Library. He obtained Bachelor and Master Degrees in Library and Information Science from University of Ibadan.

Adebiyi, Adebanjo O. is a Reference Librarian at Tai- Solarin University of Education. He holds a Bachelor and Master Degree in Library and Information Science from Tai-Solarin University of Education and University of Ibadan, respectively. He is a member of the NLA.