

**PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION
MANAGEMENT AND “MISINFORMATION”
SURROUNDING COVID -19 IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

At the outbreak of corona virus in Nigeria, the Federal government set up a Presidential Task Force to enlighten the Nigerian public on how to contain the pandemic. In spite of this, there were much “misinformation” that the Nigerian public were subjected to about the pandemic. The study was carried out to assess public perception of government information management and purported misinformation surrounding COVID-19 in Nigeria. Four research questions were raised to guide the study. The study used survey as the design and the questionnaire as the instrument. With a sample size of 300 across six cities, each representing each of the six geopolitical zones of the federation, findings showed that the audience were not adequately informed on what the Task Force claimed as misinformation of the public by non-experts and non-state actors. Also findings showed that respondents’ perceived that the Federal Government handled information on the purported “Chinese doctors” haphazardly and was full of blame trading among agencies of the Federal Government that were supposedly responsible for bringing in the supposed Chinese doctors who turned out be technicians of a Chinese company in the country. The study therefore recommended among others, that government should make use of development communication experts in events of this kind, to reach out to the people. Similarly, the use of folk media of communication and indigenous languages is recommended, especially to reach out to the fairly literate and illiterate populations in urban and rural areas.

Keywords: Public Perception, Government Information Management, Misinformation, Covid-19, Nigeria

Background

Coronavirus (COVID-19), ravaging the world from late 2019, according to Adhikari, Meng and Zhuo (2020), was identified as the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness in Wuhan, Hubel Province, China, beginning in December, 2019 and had gripped virtually, all the countries of the world. At the advent of the disease, through its peak, various kinds of information were generated from among world leaders, the elite and even from among the ordinary citizens in various countries. Some of this information was classified as myths or outright misinformation. Some information provided at the time contradicted the reality and was capable of misleading the public for whom the information was aimed at serving. As a result, what became glaring was apparent confusion which characterized the conversation while the

public were left to fight the disease. However, some of the points raised in the conversation seemed to have their own merits which would thus, engender public trust even in the midst of the confusion.

One of such misinformation was the United States' President Donald Trump's public suggestion that hydroxyl chloroquine was a potent treatment for corona virus. But this was attacked by many medical experts and scientists. The position of the medical experts and scientists was based on the fact that the President's proposal was unscientific (Wong, 2020). President Trump's suggestion seemed to be buttressed by a former corona virus patient and the Governor of Bauchi State, Nigeria who attested to the potency of chloroquine as the drug that was used in treating his corona virus ailment. Although some medical experts treated the governor's claim as "misinformation," he stated that he had no apology for letting the public know that he was treated with chloroquine and it worked for him (Haruna, 2020). This was further buttressed by the Chairman of DAAR Communication, Raymond Dokpesi, on his discharge from hospital after recovering from corona virus disease (AIT, 2020, May 14).

Also, the Governor of Nairobi City County, Kenya, Mike Sonko proposed that taking alcohol would cure corona virus. In his argument, he stated that alcohol had the power of killing the virus in the throat. He labelled alcohol as "throat sanitizer". This, too was seen by many experts as "misinformation", adding that the postulation was lacking in scientific proof (Feleke, 2020). In Iran, an Islamic Prophet Mehdi Sabili prescribed camel urine as a cure for corona virus. This too, did not go without public criticism as being "misinformation" (Radio Farda, 2020).

In Nigeria, there had been various proposals which were also termed as misinformation. For instance, a Pharmaceutical Scientist and former chairman, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof. Muarice Iwu claimed that he had a scientifically proven cure for COVID-19. This was regarded as "misinformation" (Elebeke, 2020). There was the issue of steam inhalation therapy (boiling water mixed with onions, ginger, nymph leaves, and garlic) as a cure for corona virus yet this was also seen as "misinformation". The discovery of herbal cure for corona virus in Madagascar and subsequent endorsement by the Nigerian government was seen by the World Health Organization (WHO) and experts across the world as another "misinformation" (Vaughan, 2020; France 24, 2020).

Similarly, many Nigerians believed that the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 and National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) were using the opportunity to enrich themselves from the funds allocated for the control of the disease in the country. Others also were of the opinion that the Taskforce did not coordinate information on corona virus adequately.

Statement of the Problem

Indeed, because of the novelty of corona virus, information became one of the most sought commodities. As noted in the background, this information came in diverse ways with the intention to make available to the public what the people needed at the time. While these and other sorts of "misinformation" persisted, it must be noted that some corona virus victims and those who cared to prevent contracting the disease, trusted and attempted some of the suggestions made in order to prevent or cure the disease. In such a situation, information handling becomes an enigma in times of emergency. The outcome could have been plausible, confusing or devastating. The information manager, is therefore vested with a huge responsibility of managing information to accommodate the diverse needs and angsts of the people. The problem of this study is thus, stated: how did Federal Government of Nigeria handle information during corona virus emergency to mitigate the spate of misinformation and what is the perception of the people of the "misinformation"?

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study.

1. What is public perception of governments' management of information associated with corona virus in Nigeria?
2. What is public perception of "misinformation" associated with corona virus in Nigeria?
3. In what ways have demographics contributed to public perception of "misinformation" associated with corona virus in Nigeria?
4. Which medium of communication has been mostly used by the Nigerian public for information about corona virus to the Nigerian?

Review of Related Literature

Khan and McIntosh (2005) trace the history of human corona viruses to 1965 when Tyrrell and Bynoe (1966) discovered a passage virus named B814. The discovery was made in human embryonic tracheal organ cultures obtained from the respiratory tract of an adult with common cold. According to the scholars, the presence of an infectious agent was demonstrated by inoculating the medium from these cultures intra-nasally in human volunteers. As a result, colds were produced in significant proportion of subjects but Tyrrell and Bynoe were unable to grow the agent in the tissue culture at that time. On his part, Korsman and Preiser (2012) state that, corona virus disease was first described in 1931, (Peiris, 2012). Korsman and Preiser, however, agree with Khan and McIntosh (2005), as they argue that the first corona virus (HCoV-229E) was isolated from humans in 1965, adding that until the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome in 2002, only two human corona viruses (HCoV) were known. These were HCoV229E and HCoV-OC43.

Khan and McIntosh (2005) earlier stated that, given the enormous variety of animal corona viruses, it was not surprising when the cause of a very new, severe acute respiratory syndrome, called SARS, emerged between 2002 and 2003 as a corona virus from Southern China and spread throughout the world with quantifiable speed. The virus was observed to grow fairly easily in tissue culture, enabling quick

sequencing of the genome. The sequencing was also observed to differ sufficiently from any of the known human or animal corona viruses to place this virus into a new group, along with a virus that was subsequently cultured from Himalayan palm civets, from which it presumably had emerged. Since after 2003, different human viruses have been discovered. Burrell and Murphy (2017) argue that since 2005, dozens of new corona viruses have been isolated from bats and there is evidence that human respiratory corona viruses, SARS corona virus and MERS corona virus, may each have originally emerged from ancestral bat viruses.

Information is one of the resources that information managers have always taken for granted but very vital to the sustainable growth. God saw the need for proper management of information and that was why He knew when it was appropriate to address the various forces of creation to get the world created as a wonderful place that humans and other creatures are enjoying. God knew when to give command and knew when to persuade. He commanded the creation of all creatures except man when He said "... Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over the cattle and over all the earth..." (Genesis, 1: 26). The stress here is "Let us make" which shows consultation and persuasion and this is at variance with "let there be" which shows a command. The good thing is that both the command and the persuasion worked adequately for the creation of the earth because God combined the two approaches to attain the success of creating the world and everything in it.

Can one imagine that God was helpless and that was why He chose to appeal to forces with Him to help in making man? No, far from it. He could have commanded the creation of man just as He did other creatures but God in His infinite wisdom used that to teach humans how to manage information. There is a time to command and get the required results and there is a time to persuade and get the expected results. What this implies is that when we misplace one for the other, the required results may not be achieved. If when command is necessary, we use persuasion, then failure can set in and if when persuasion is necessary, we use command, failure can equally set in.

Going back to the story of God's creation, God is the Master of time. He knew when to give information and He also programmed His creation according to time. This again, tells us that information management is profoundly premised on timeliness. What time is necessary for any piece of information to be released to the people; how appropriate is such information? Because no one is expected to be denied of information, one can note here, how terrific the essence of information management is (Udodo, 2019). This is so because such information can get lost in transit if not properly handled and one can only imagine the outcome of such loss. The outcome can be disaffection; it can cost productivity; and it can threaten peace.

Information management implies appropriate and timely communication. This is why Wilson (1997) states that communication goes beyond simple concept of giving or passing information or information transmission, adding that in today's

world, communication is a big business because it is what makes the world go round. Conversely, without articulated communication, nothing moves on well but this is what many development agencies pay little or no attention to. Sometimes authorities merely use communication as a reactionary approach to lapses that communication would have cleared *ab initio* if it had been properly integrated in the programme.

Communication makes every human action possible. This, in other words, shows the imperative of communication in any human community. Stressing on the significance of communication, Nwanne (2006) states that, "Communication is, without doubt, a basic human survival skill. Irrespective of the level of development in any society, those who make up that environment must exchange information to achieve social cohesion, mental advancement, economic and political progress" (p.11). Udouo and Nwosu (2019) observe that the need for communication for development and sustenance of such development emanates from the fact that no human activity can succeed without appropriate and effective communication. They add, however, that "since communication is every person's activity – consciously or unconsciously – many individuals and organizations take for granted that communication is the simplest act that one can be engaged in. This is really one of the reasons many organizations and government agencies fail in their bid to achieve the development goals they have set" (p. 43). To start with, communication strategically designed to achieve sustainable development should consider the intended beneficiaries of the project who in this case, are placed in the position of the audience.

Mboho (1991) stresses the need for communication to be focused on mobilizing the people for the development of the society. In line with this consideration, Center, Jackson, Smith and Stansberry (2011) assert that "the changing physical and social makeup of communities" (p.50) should be a priority for such communication. Indeed, understanding the composition of the beneficiaries would enable development experts to design the type of communication that will help the beneficiaries to participate in the development projects. In this case, creating awareness and mobilizing citizens to adopt measures that would make them not infected by corona virus, makes it a development project, mainly because health communication is development communication.

Gambo and Aji (2008) provide an instance where the Federal Government of Nigeria had to use communication only as a counter-approach to a sustained anti-polio vaccine administration campaign by Muslim clergy, traditional rulers and some elite in Northern Nigeria. Although polio immunization is a World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) programme, at the inception of the programme, the Federal Government of Nigeria had refused at inception to take into consideration the socio-cultural/religious nature as well as educational level of the Muslim majority Northern Nigeria as these factors relate to effective communication. Because government communication strategy was mainly on the use of modern media, the use of the traditional rulers and Muslim clergy was ignored to the advantage of the

anti-polio vaccine campaigners who used the latter to call the people out for resistance.

Gambo and Aji's (2008) observation seemed to repeat during the corona virus in the country when governments failed to make use of the clerics and traditional rulers in reaching out to the people until the many deaths that were recorded in Kano and tagged "mysterious deaths". Since development communication aims at sensitizing or mobilizing the audience for action, it means that it should be interactive and being interactive, it should not be unidirectional, just as Gambo (2007) has observed. It is supposed to be both vertical and lateral, top-bottom, bottom-top, left-right and right-left (Ohiagu, 2014). It is only in this way that development needs and programmes can be discussed by the provider and the recipient. According to Udoudo and Nwosu (2019), "Gambo (2007) has noted, many times, development communication merely goes from the provider of the project (sender) to the receiver who is not given the opportunity to critically contribute any idea or to accept or reject the offer. The wrong assumption that some providers of projects often have is that the supposed beneficiary of the project is a desperate receiver who has no choice other than to receive what has been provided him" (p. 48).

Theoretical Background

Public Sphere theory centres on the need for the citizens to participate in government decisions that affect the citizens. This can take place in form of town hall meetings or small group gathering (Jacobson, 2017). Habermas (1991) sees public sphere as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed. Although Public Sphere theory is mainly about governance and democratic affairs, government information management on Covid-19 and the perception of the public adequately falls in line. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of information came from the government to the citizens on what to do to protect themselves. This information from the government also gave the citizens the opportunity to freely discuss the information that came from the government in accordance with their perception. This led to the various ideas the citizens had of the information and the directives given by the government to the citizens.

Methodology

Survey was the study design with questionnaire as the instrument. The study was carried out in six cities in Nigeria, namely: Benin, Jos, Kano, Lagos, Owerri and Yola respectively. Each of the cities represented the six geo-political zones of the country, namely: South-South, North-Central, North-West, South-West, South-East and North-East. Each city was randomly selected. Each of the cities had equal number of respondents (50), making a total of 300 respondents. Convenience sampling method was used in the administration of the questionnaire. Simple percentages were used to analyse the data.

Results

Table 1: Public Perception of Government Management of Information on Corona virus

Up-to-date with Daily Briefing	Yes 247 (82.33%)	No 53 (17.67%)	
Alerted by Daily Briefing	Yes 253 (84.33%)	No 47 (15.67%)	
Handling of Information on "Chinese Doctors"	Blame Trading 88 (29.33%)	Team Spirit 68 (22.67%)	Haphazard 144 (48%)
Information Between Fed & State Governments	Always Well Coordinated 84 (28%)	Always Conflicting 72 (24%)	Always Confusing 144 (48%)

N = 300

The majority of the respondents were following the daily briefing on Covid-19 by the National Centre on Disease and Control (NCDC). Similarly, majority of the respondents perceived that government management of coronavirus information was done haphazardly. Information between the Federal Government and the states was perceived to be poorly coordinated.

Table 2: Public Perception of "Misinformation" Associated with Corona virus

Information that Hydroxy chloroquine Cures	True 88 (29.33%)	False 41(13.67%)	Unverified 171 (57%)
Information that Steam Therapy Cures	True 52 (17.33%)	False 55 (18.33)	Unverified 193 (64.43%)
Information that Malaria is Treated in Place of Corona virus	True 87 (29%)	False 59 (19.67%)	Unverified 154 (51.33%)
Information that Corona virus Cannot Survive Nigeria's Temperature	True 67 (22.33%)	False 121 (40.33%)	Unverified 112 (37.33%)
Information that Coron avirus is used in Nigeria by Governments and Agencies for money-making	True 171 (57%)	False 42 (14%)	Unverified 87 (29%)

N = 300

The perception of about 60% of the respondents on hydroxyl chloroquine as a cure to corona virus was that the information was unverified. Similarly, over 50% of the respondents perceived that information that malaria is treated in place of corona virus was also subjected to verification. The majority of the respondents perceived that information that corona virus cannot survive Nigeria's temperature was false.

Almost 60% of the respondents perceived that the Nigerian governments and their agencies were using corona virus to make money.

Table 3: Demographics of the Respondents

Sex	Male	Female			
	173 (57.67%)	127 (42.33%)			
Age	18 – 25	26 – 35	36 –45	46 and above	
	72 (24%)	111 (37%)	67 (22.33%)	50 (16.67%)	
Educational Qualifications	SSSC	ND	HND/BA/BSC	MA/MSc	PhD
	61 (20.33%)	43 (14.33%)	141 (47%)	40 (13.33%)	15 (5%)

N = 300

Most of the data generated for the study emanated from between ages 18 and 45; and educational qualification between National Diploma and Bachelor’s degree.

Table 4: Media of Communication

Medium through which Information is sourced	Newspaper	Magazine	Radio	Television	Social Media	Interpersonal Communication
	6 (2%)	3 (1%)	3 10.33%	122(40.67%)	129 (43%)	9 (3%)

N = 300

The respondents depended more on the social media and the television to get their daily briefing on Covid-19 by the Nigerian Centre for Disease and Control.

Discussion of Findings

RQ 1: What is public perception of governments’ management of information associated with corona virus in Nigeria?

The Federal Government of Nigeria, through Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, gave a daily briefing on the spread of the pandemic, guidelines on how to not get infected by the disease and the number of deaths, resulting from the pandemic. The Task Force was conducting the daily briefing on behalf of both the Federal and the state governments. This briefing was conducted through various media of communication available to the respondents. Questions asked centred on handling of the purported “Chines doctors”, organization of information between the Federal and state governments. A total of 84.33% of the respondents followed the daily briefing. Respondents’ perception on the handling of the purported “Chinese doctors” was that the agency handled it haphazardly and was full of blame trading among the agencies of the Federal Government that were supposedly responsible for bringing in the supposed Chinese doctors who turned out be technicians of a Chinese company in the country.

The handling of communication by the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19, as perceived by the respondents goes contrary to Udouo and Nwosu (2019) assertion that "communication for development and sustenance of such development emanates from the fact that no human activity can succeed without appropriate and effective communication" (p.43). If management of communication on COVID-19 by the agency could not be based on achievement of sustainable development – making coordinated efforts to keep the audience abreast of what they ought to be aware of – it means the awareness creating purpose of the agency was not fully achieved.

RQ 2: What is public perception of "misinformation" associated with corona virus in Nigeria?

Some perceived misconceptions associated with COVID-19 were put forward to assess respondents' own perception of these acclaimed misconceptions. They were: that hydroxyl chloroquine cures corona virus; that steam therapy cures corona virus; that malaria was treated in place of corona virus; that corona virus cannot survive Nigeria's temperature; and Nigerian governments and their agencies were making money from corona virus scare. On hydroxyl chloroquine, close to 60% perceived that the information was unverified; on steam therapy, 64% perceived that the information was unverified; on treating malaria in place of corona virus, over 53% perceived it was unverified while 29% perceived it to be true; on information that corona virus cannot survive Nigeria's temperature, only 40% perceived this to be untrue; and on information that Nigerian governments and their agencies were making money out of coronavirus scare, the perception of about 60% of the respondents was that it was true while only 14% perceived it to be untrue. This again, shows that the audience were not adequately informed on what the Task Force claimed as misinformation of the public by non-experts and non-state actors.

Since the Presidential Taskforce had admitted that these issues were misinformation to mislead the general public, what did the Task Force do to ensure that the misinformation was vigorously countered? From what the result of this study has shown, it can be inferred that enough had not been done to counter such misinformation. The approach adopted by the task Force can be likened to the observation by Udouo, Nwanmereni and Ire (2015) that when there is an outbreak of crisis, the press seems not to examine and eventually have a vision of the outcome of the crisis. As a result, it cannot adopt a theory which could guide it in actualizing its mission. The Task Force had failed to carry out appropriate investigation to enable it apply the right kind of communication to dismiss the misinformation. The critical mass of communication aimed at addressing public misgivings should have consistently cover language use, media/modes and their credibility and audience spread. Daily briefing by the Task Force, using only modern media of communication could hardly go for the critical mass of such perceived awareness creation communication with the presumed aim of reducing the incidence of the pandemic.

RQ 3: In what ways have demographics contributed to public perception of “misinformation” associated with corona virus in Nigeria?

Both sexes of the respondents provided the data that gave rise to the results of the study. Ages between 18 and 46 and above were involved in the supply of the data. However, those between the ages of 18 and 45 constituted the bulk of the respondents. All categories of educational levels were represented in procuring the data. However, those with Bachelor’s degree and its equivalent and Senior Secondary School Certificate formed the majority of the respondents. Based on the age differentials and academic qualifications of the respondents, one can infer that the findings of the study are basically the perception of young adults. Perhaps, the results of the study could have been different if it were based on older people. The results also showed that the respondents were educated enough to understand why they provided the responses that they provided. In other words, the findings of the study can to a large extent, be relied upon as what the perceptions of the respondents represented.

RQ 4: Which medium of communication has been mostly used by the Nigerian public for information about corona virus to the Nigerian?

The media through which the respondents relied on for the daily briefing by the Presidential Task Force on Corona virus are a clear indication of the ages and the academic qualifications of the respondents. Social media had 43% of the respondents’ reliance for their daily briefing while television had a little above 40%. These two media types reaffirmed the young age and the level of academic qualifications that were involved in the study. That some of the “misinformation” agreed to by the respondents, could probably have arisen due to overwhelming dependence on social media which allow any kind of information without adequate investigation before being disseminated to the users, is commonplace. Also, social media are producer-consumer media that allow the users to participate in discussing and circulating the information that they have helped to produce. This finding corroborates Nyekwere and Adakole (2018) that see social media news is as news of the people, by the people and for the people. This is why social media could have more influence on the respondents than any other medium

Conclusion

This study has come to the conclusion that respondents’ perception of the handling of the purported “Chinese doctors” was that the agency in charge handled it haphazardly and was full of blame trading among agencies of the Federal Government that were supposedly responsible for bringing in the supposed Chinese doctors who turned out be technicians of a Chinese company in the country. From the result of this study, it can be inferred that enough had not been done to inform Nigerians of who the Chinese were and what they came to do in Nigeria at the peak of the pandemic.

The daily briefing by the Presidential Task Force was not well coordinated between the Federal and state governments and was unable to significantly counter

the "misinformation" that the public held of the Coronavirus and its perceived cure. The findings of the study were basically the perception of young adults and that the respondents were educated enough to understand why they provided the responses. The two media types (social media and television) mostly depended on by the respondents in getting their daily briefing from the Presidential Task Force on Coronavirus reaffirm the young age and the level of academic qualifications of the participants who were involved in the study. Some of the "misinformation" agreed to by the respondents, could probably have arisen due to overwhelming dependence on social media which allow any kind of information without adequate investigation before being disseminated to the users. Also, social media are producer-consumer media that allow the users to participate in discussing and circulating the information that they have helped to produce.

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