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Media Literacy and Fake News: Evaluating the Roles and Responsibilities of Radio Stations in Combating Fake News in the COVID-19 Era.

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Abstract:

This study probed into media literacy and fake news by evaluating the roles and responsibilities of radio stations in combating misinformation and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 era. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) highlighted how to better understand communication during a crisis and safeguard an establishment's reputation during an emergency. This investigation embraced the qualitative research technique guided by the ethnography research paradigm, which supports information gathering through observations, interviews and evaluation of extant documented data to produce comprehensive accounts of social occurrences. A focus group discussion among radio station reporters was purposively used as data collection method. The questions put before reporters of the University of Lagos Radio Station (UNILAG Radio) were based on issues relating to strategies, circumstances, sources, modalities and perceptions of fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study discovered that fake news is attractive to

people during the time of health emergencies, such as the coronavirus pandemic, because of the attractiveness of social media and the encouragement of certain self-styled social media influencers. This factor was magnified by the fact that people were idle as a result of the lockdown and unemployment was prevalent, while reportage by mainstream media, statistics and social media trends were the convincing reasons why there was anxiety to seek information. In the process, people became victims of misinformation. The study also revealed that radio stations also leverage authentic sources of information from established organisations like the World Health Organisations (WHO) and interviews with health professionals on scientific facts. The radio station reporters agreed that transmitting fake news about COVID-19 should have consequences, and the station school quickly corrected the wrong information and offered an apology.

Keywords: Fake News, Media Literacy, COVID-19, Radio Station, Misinformation.

Introduction

The proliferation of information on the Internet has become a great source of news; however, it is unfortunate that not all the information available online is reliable. Fake news is not unique to the Internet; lately, it has become a big predicament due to today's computerised era. Fake news can be described as any information resource, either article or video, made up of false information masked as a credible information source. Fake news refers to fabricated or misleading information, offered as news that is detrimental to a person's character, entity, organisation or governmental body. Fake news has also been described as false or misleading content presented as news and communicated in formats traversing spoken, written, printed, electronic and digital communication (Bartolotta, 2016). Normally, false news is considered an infraction and a breach of public trust, but in a situation of severe global health emergency like the coronavirus (COVID-19), disseminating unreliable news may be a matter of life and death. It may constitute a grave and irreversible danger to the public who put their hope of survival on the news (Durodolu and Ibenne, 2020; Durodolu, Chisita and Dube, 2021).

It has been asserted in the perspective of the coronavirus pandemic that infodemic, which is an epidemic that is associated with misinformation, has amplified dishonesty to the extent that it requires a coordinated reaction, as a result of a superfluity of misinformation that the world has been drowned in, to source for trustworthy news items when needed. This is a demanding undertaking. Therefore, misinformation has complicated the ability to effectively respond to health emergencies like COVID-19 such that even the traditional news media establishments, with their highest level of

professionalism, are also victims (Ireton and Posetti, 2018). This has led to the dilemma of not distinguishing facts, ordinary opinions, propaganda or prejudgments. Social media has been identified as playing a leading role in spreading all manner of half-truths and outright distortions of reality that may seem dependable on the surface but are often found to be deceitful. When authenticity is long-established, the damage may be irremediable (Naeem and Bhatti, 2020; Durodolu, Ibenne and Dube, 2021).

Background to the Study

Fake news has created the dilemma of believing in information without bothering to fact-check its accuracy before consumption. This has led to misunderstanding and panic as lack of ability to converse the authentic details surrounding the information (CGFGlobal, 2020): for example, news surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the human race. According to Rosenwald (2017), individuals have influenced and fabricated data for many years. Consequently, the one solution to preventing the spread of fake news or disinformation is media literacy (Ascott, 2020).

The growing spread of fake news could be associated with internet explosion and digital media channels (Ephraim, 2020). It is assumed that most of the population globally is connected digitally, and this new information environment has allowed for the rapid dissemination of rumours, hoaxes and fake news (Ephraim, 2020). In the early 1930s, a media literacy curriculum was designed for instructors to recognise different misinformation devices. Media literacy as a construct has been taught in schools for many years; however, the present digital era does not need a printing press or satellite dish to disseminate information widely and faster

(Rosenwald, 2017). Media literacy is defined as the ability to apply important thinking skills to the messages, signs and symbols transmitted through mass media technology (Vinney, 2022). Media literacy can also be defined as understanding the information presented and responding correctly (Futureplan, 2021). In addition, media literacy provides a baseline to access, analyse, evaluate, create and participate with messages in various forms, such as print to video and the Internet. Also, media literacy helps to build an understanding of the role of media in society, including its role in combating fake news through radio stations.

Based on the foregoing, it is exigent to educate consumers of information through media literacy by using radio stations to disseminate information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because we live in a society that is flooded with media in various forms; therefore, the acquisition of media literacy skills would allow individuals to understand and evaluate all the media messages they get daily and enable them to carefully select the information or news to read, watch and listen to. The worries over fake news have prompted a restored interest in the different types of media literacy. Due to the current expectations, Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu (2019) noted that literacy interventions would enable individuals to be protected against the destructive effects of fake news.

In addition, Jones-Jang et al. (2019) submitted that media literacy significantly enhances the chances of identifying fake news, while Wardle and Derekhshan (2017) opined that if media literacy is accepted as a compulsory course and taught as a vibrant media literacy education in schools, it would train individuals with the ability to discern the confusion associated with fake information or news. According to Mcdougall (2019), media literacy will facilitate healthy scepticism and flexibility towards all

media, while media literacy should not just be an activity to teach students the difference between fake news and real news or information. However, Baker (2020) stated that media literacy encompasses applying significant philosophy to what people take in or consume, although he posited that many media-illiterate people would want to believe fake information or news that people will post. Also, Bouygues (2019) cited in Phi Delta Kappa (2021), suggested that a lot must be done to teach skills in evaluating sources of information or news.

Media literacy is the capacity to think critically in relation to information consumed or created. It comprises the ability to differentiate fact from mere opinion and comprehend how media can persuade people. Media literacy is central to being an informed and critical thinker in the realm where technology, social media and global news agencies are pervasive, assisting to protect people against excessive persuasion and false information (Gallagher and Magid, 2017). Media literacy tools, including newspapers, television and radios stations, and social media platforms, have been used to disseminate fake and factual information to people worldwide. Evidence from studies reviewed indicates that media literacy education can help individuals become sensitive to information and learn to identify fake news. Presently, the COVID-19 global pandemic has been associated with various fake information or news, thereby creating fear and panic among the people concerning the effect of the virus on them. More so, educating people through media literacy would help them to be able to identify the real sources of the information or news that are posted online. Radio stations are one of the tools for media literacy and are readily available to spread information to people both in rural and urban areas.

Radio has continued to be an essential mass medium globally, including in Nigeria. Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) and several others in Europe and the USA invented the radio. The radio was developed in the 1890s and has become one of the most widely used mass media globally. Despite the popularity of the Internet, radio remains the mass medium that reaches the most people quickly. Radios are portable, convenient and cheap; free signals also make it a prevalent medium. Radio as a mass medium utilises electromagnetic radio waves through transmitters and antennas to disseminate information to listeners (Ephraim, 2020). There are state- and private-owned radio stations in many capitals, cities, towns and communities across the world. Radio stations function as a channel of mass medium, especially for disseminating information, including public health information, as was the case during the Ebola virus outbreak in 2014 and the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020.

The coronavirus disease, popularly known as COVID-19, is a deadly illness caused by a coronavirus. It was first reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China. The pandemic started as a severe pneumonia case of unidentified cause. In Africa, Egypt recorded the first coronavirus case on 14 February, 2020, while Nigeria reported its first case of COVID-19 on 27 February, 2020. Presently, over 5 million cases of the virus have been reported globally (Akande and Akande, 2020).

As part of their determination to fight the spread of fake news and misinformation regarding COVID-19, many countries have resorted to the use of radio stations to keep the public informed about issues relating to the virus, no matter their level of education and location. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to use radio to disseminate safe and accurate information about hand washing, social distancing and other safe practices, as well as

information regarding the prevention and transmission of the coronavirus globally.

The roles and responsibilities of radio stations in combating fake news regarding the COVID-19 virus cannot be over-emphasised. According to Kapoor (2020), radio can control opinions, transform conduct and inform people about COVID-19. Radio also can promote citizens' attitudes during periods of a health crisis, such as COVID-19. Therefore, to combat the spread of fake news on COVID-19, radio stations have to contact and collaborate with the information departments of the ministries of health and other recognised health-based NGOs in their respective cities or towns (Ephraim, 2020).

Also, radio stations in each country could broadcast their daily statistical updates to checkmate fake news on COVID-19. These local broadcasts should be based on verified information that could appear as short items in the transmission or in-between programmes. These verified statistical figures could minimise the spread of rumours and fears about COVID-19 (Ephraim, 2020). Also, radio stations can use jingles to combat the spread of fake news on COVID-19. The implication is that radio stations can directly produce and use jingles to broadcast and promote verified information and expose fake information about COVID-19. Ephraim (2020) suggested that the message of the jingle should be presented in a simple language: for example, indigenous languages.

Another way radio stations can combat fake news on COVID-19 is to invite health experts and NGO officers who work on COVID-19 cases for interviews during news broadcasts or talk shows and allow people to phone in during such programmes. This could help to clarify any rumours or misinformation about the COVID-19 disease (Ephraim, 2020). Radio stations must ensure that news and programme

contents are carefully sourced and modified so that listeners in cities and at the grassroots can receive updated and accurate information about COVID-19.

It must be pointed out that combating fake news on COVID-19 or any other issue for that matter is not a simple assignment, and that is why radio stations would need to involve the communities around them, including the young people and children, to channel their energies positively to fight the spread of fake news. Therefore, this study investigates the roles of radio stations in combating the spread of fake news in the COVID-19 era.

Statement of the Problem

Fake news is a substantial problem facing global society. It is a problem as old as human interaction, even though it has developed into a more disturbing issue due to the expansion of information communication technologies, global news networks and widespread radio transmission, allowing for rapid broadcast and communication. The coronavirus outbreak has been complicated by the enormous amount of distorted, inaccurate and false information about the virus, most especially on social media, which is a largely unregulated online environment, unlike a radio station with an identifiable address that makes accountability for misinformation possible.

Radio transmission has been identified as having the capacity to reach many more people than any other mode of information dissemination; therefore, it holds a significant and vantage opportunity to pass across information relevant to combating the spread of COVID-19. The hesitancy and reluctance attributed to vaccination have also been traced to the spread of fake news; hence, the role of radio stations is to inform people through the

dissemination of scientific facts on the benefits of being vaccinated and its implications for the socio-economic well-being of citizens.

As part of the determination to fight the spread of fake news and misinformation regarding COVID-19, many countries have resorted to the use of radio stations to keep the public informed about issues relating to the virus. This is to ensure that correct information concerning the disease gets to the people, no matter their level of education and location. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to use radio to disseminate safe and accurate information about hand washing, social distancing, vaccination and other safe practices, including information regarding the prevention and transmission of the coronavirus.

Combating fake news on COVID-19 or any other issue for that matter is not a simple assignment, and that is why radio stations would need to involve the communities around them as well as the young people and children in the community by guiding the youths to channel their energies positively towards stemming the spread of fake news. Therefore, the study investigated the role of radio stations in combating the spread of fake news in the COVID-19 era.

The vulnerability of epidemics to misinformation somewhat stems from their inherent characteristics. Epidemics, particularly those instigated by new viruses, are usually accompanied by doubts around their causes, transmission and remedy. These conditions foster the spread of misinformation, half-truths and distortion of facts, which serves as a sense-making mechanism (Zeng and Chan, 2021).

Significance of the Study

This research is essential due to its significant contribution to the body of knowledge in four cardinal ways. Extant literature on media literacy, fake news and dissemination of news from a radio station during the period of COVID-19 was revised to reveal something novel and detect a gap in research to expose strengths and weaknesses of the subject matter. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people were too skeptical about the emergence of the deadly virus. Engaging in media literacy could assist people in effectively evaluating and navigating online information before sharing or disseminating information that might be fake. Fake news instigates panic, thus affecting people who choose to believe all kinds of news disseminated through social media and other online platforms. Therefore, this paper aims to caution people to evaluate the authenticity of information before they act on it. For example, most of the governments of the world are working to ensure that everyone is vaccinated against the coronavirus disease but there is so much fake news that the COVID-19 vaccine was manufactured to kill people in order to reduce the population of the world. Currently, the Government and the World Health Organization (WHO) are struggling to manage the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine as planned because people have been fed fake news. Therefore, believing any other piece of information besides what they read on social media and other online platforms is difficult.

The study made recommendations that can positively impact the profession of Library and Information Studies (LIS) in managing fake news and evaluating information available in public spaces. Libraries and relevant authorities in the public and private sectors will be able to implement new guidelines to act against individuals and media implicated in the deliberate dissemination of fake news to cause

emotional distress. The media companies (television and radio stations) should train journalists on how to evaluate information before broadcasting it to the general public by leveraging facilities available in the library for the purpose of fact-checking information before making it public, especially on critical issues of COVID-19.

The research contributes to knowledge by making valuable suggestions that will lead to policy changes in managing fake news, media literacy and evaluation of information resources. This is important because changing a prevailing policy necessitates a tedious process. Lastly, the research contributes to knowledge by expanding existing theory and shedding light on the subject matter of media literacy and fake news using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT).

Originality is one of the most important criteria considered in this research. There is no evidence - based on a rigorous database search - that a study of this nature has been carried out in the context of the geographical location of the research environment.

Theoretical Framework: Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was used to broaden understanding of the subject matter of the crisis of fake news in the epoch of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This is a theory propagated by W Timothy Coombs in his research of 2007, where he highlighted that a better understanding of crisis communication could be used to safeguard the reputation of an establishment during a crisis. This theory provides a framework for understanding this dynamic by providing a scheme for anticipating how the reaction to a crisis will be in terms of threats to an organisation's reputation by presenting evidence-based

disaster communication guidelines (Coombs, 2007). In this case, concerning the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become imperative that media organisations deepen their knowledge about the crisis in order to disseminate accurate information. Inability to do this may impede their reputation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) postulates that by understanding crisis, the crisis media can regulate the crisis response strategy or approaches that will maximise their status and reputation. In other words, the audience tends to lose confidence in the media if inaccurate information is publicised. Therefore, managing a crisis of the nature of COVID-19 calls for responsible reportage. This theory can assist the media, especially in managing and examining the crisis in a manner that will not be damaging to their professional reputation. This can only happen when information concerning the crisis reflects the true position of events. Three (3) factors in an emergency situation can shape the reputation of a media outlet: (1) initial crisis responsibility, (2) crisis history, and (3) prior relational reputation.

Various reportage of the coronavirus pandemic prompted ambiguity, promoted panic and stimulated anxiety. However, how media establishments, especially radio stations, communicate about it can produce intelligibility, transparency, build resilience and catalyse optimism, which can considerably reduce causality. In a situation like this, when candid and truthful information is not at the disposal of the general public, they tend to feel irresolute and unsure about what they know (Mendy, Stewart and VanAkin, 2020). At a time like this, audience devotion is finite; fresh, disorderly inputs overwhelm people's capability to process information. The propensity to seek for information from any means possible makes them victims of fake and

adulterated news. Uncertainty, apparent threats and fear can lead to cognitive freezing (Eppler and Mengis, 2020).

During the COVID-19 era, the fake news crisis became regular and it stimulated fear and doubt of the aptitude of leaders (Arinze-Umobi and Onyinye 2020). Therefore, SCCT helps media organisations to understand the crisis of COVID-19 and how to comprehend the negative effects of inaccurate information on their organisational reputation and effective communication to the public. However, fake news tends to leak before the legitimate information is announced or published. By the time the legitimate information is made known to the public, it no longer has value and is not considered as fake news has already laid the foundation. People tend to believe first-hand information as well as information communicated on social media and other informal platforms.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) presented crisis response strategy guidelines, an evidence-based companion for evaluating and responding to crisis situations, and countenancing media organisations to make knowledgeable, deliberate and constructive decisions. These guidelines are crisis responsibility and reputational threat, crisis history and relational reputation and crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007).

Methodology

This investigation embraced the qualitative research technique guided by the ethnography research paradigm, which supports information-gathering through observations, interviews and evaluation of extant documented data to produce comprehensive accounts of social occurrences (Scott, Jennifer, Goldman and Kitto, 2013). A focus

group discussion is an interview of approximately six to twelve people who share related physiognomies or shared interests. It is a type of qualitative data collection process that implies that the data is descriptive and cannot be measured numerically (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). The focus group discussion for this study was carried out among nine (9) staff members of UNILAG Radio at the University of Lagos, who were allocated participation codes through serial numbering. All the staff were included in the research because they were core professionals in the field of journalism at the radio station; other supporting staff were excluded.

The participants were selected purposively to elicit responses concerning their roles and responsibilities in combating fake news during the COVID-19 era. Their opinion will likely reflect the general opinion in a similar environment. Additionally, indiscriminate telephone interviews were conducted on staff who could not come to the office due to the lockdown necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to obtain confirmatory data used for triangulation. Data acquired from the two approaches were used as a foundation for conclusion and generalisation.

The rationale for using the qualitative technique was to stimulate uninterrupted personal responses to questions about the participants' experiences and insights into the subject matter, to spawn a vigorous understanding of unambiguous issues concerning the management of fake news in an era where truthful information can be a matter of life and death. This was centred on the conjecture and assumption that numerous perceptions of social reality will uncover the complexities of a collective problem. The quantitative research method was considered inappropriate and incompatible for this study

because personal understandings and the scope of social reality cannot be statistically appraised.

Aim of the Study

The study sought to generally evaluate the roles and responsibilities of radio stations in combating fake news in the COVID-19 era concerning media literacy and fake news.

Research Questions

1. What convincing strategies make fake news seem to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What circumstances would make a fake news story more believable in the era of COVID- 19?
3. How does the radio station source for information to disseminate about the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How should radio stations act in case fake news or misinformation has earlier emanated from their stations?
5. What modality does the radio station follow in order to fact-check information before disseminating it?
6. What is the role of the library as an institution for authenticating information concerning the COVID-19 virus?
7. What do you think is the difference between popular public perception and genuine information?
8. What do you think should be the consequence for the deliberate dissemination of fake news on a radio station?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The subject coverage of this article was limited to media literacy, fake news, roles and responsibilities of radio stations in combating the problem of fake news during the time of the coronavirus outbreak. This means the intention of the research was to investigate the incidences of fake news: what makes it believable, the process of information dissemination, management of misinformation and fact-checking strategy during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subject coverage: This article was limited to media literacy, fake news, corona virus (COVID-19), and the roles and responsibilities of journalists at the radio station. The research comes up with suggestions from the participants in the focus group discussion on ways of combating fake news during the COVID-19 era by rigorously subjecting information to intellectual scrutiny and evaluation before disseminating it to the public. This will go a long way in reducing the negative impact of the pandemic when people have access to accurate information.

Research environment: The research setting for this study was restricted to the University of Lagos, established in 1962. The University of Lagos has a population of nearly 60,000 students, with a staff strength of 3,365 made up as follows: 1,386 Administrative and Technical Staff; 1,164 Junior Staff; and 813 (1500/1600) Academic Staff. This is the reason why the University of Lagos is referred to as the university of first choice because it has the largest student population in Nigeria (University of Lagos, 2021).

Methodological scope: This study was qualitative, with focus group discussion used as a means of data gathering.

Results and Discussions

Results (responses from the Focus Group (FG) Interview)/discussion of findings

FGQ1: What convincing strategies make fake news seem to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Responses: Most interviewees affirmed that the effective strategies that made fake news seem to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic were social media and the advent of new technology. Another strategy was claims that the news sources came from experts or professionals. Some respondents went as far as naming self-acclaimed professional bloggers like Linda Ikeji.

"Proliferation of information about COVID 19 from prominent and respected citizens like religious leaders, well-known actors, celebrities and politicians makes the evidence of the information compelling and believable, and because of their position in the society, many people accept information from them with little doubt."

The implication is that detecting fake news has become difficult because of the fragmented media setting with innumerable information sources designed to suit different shades of opinion and every ideological perception. In situations like this, many people pay less attention to the source of information seen especially on social media. Therefore, they could simply mistake satire or fiction for factual news.

FGQ2: What circumstances would make a fake news story more believable in the era of COVID-19?

Responses: Factors like widespread misinformation, acclaimed eyewitness, idleness and a large social media presence occasioned by lockdown, unemployment,

reportage by mainstream media, convincing statistics and social media trends.

"At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, information in the public space was scanty; this is because the disease was new. In the moment of panic, many fake news evangelists moved to fill the information vacuum. Since scientists are still struggling for a solution, people tend to accept the available information rather than information from authentic sources."

"Some people continue to appeal to emotions based on the past historical errors that bedevilled the vaccination process of previous outbreaks. This makes the spread of fake news almost irresistible."

The implication is that it has become a major challenge in the modern time to identify real information because of many factors. For instance, confirmation bias is the penchant to favour information previously acquired by supporting prior beliefs or values. As a member of a community, the tendency exists to hold on to information that supports existing views by disregarding contrary information. Confirmation bias may be difficult to eliminate totally but can be managed through proper education, training and acquisition of critical thinking skills (Kendra, 2021).

Another limitation that is common in human society, which could affect the information processing ability that makes it difficult to question incorrect information or fake news, is cognitive bias. This is the act of processing information selectively, and it is a deviation from standard or rationality in judgment whereby people construct their own "subjective reality" from their perception or insight of the input, a person's construction of reality, and not the objective or impartial input. This may

dictate their behaviour on the acceptability of the information; hence, it may occasionally lead to perceptual distortion, erroneous judgment, illogical interpretation or irrationality (Fine, 2006).

One factor that makes people vulnerable to fake news is post-truth, which relates to a situation that exists in an environment in which facts are regarded as irrelevant or less significant than personal opinions and sentiments, and emotional appeals are used to influence public opinion. This is a situation where logic is dismissed and scientific fact is disregarded (Harsin, 2018).

FGQ3: How does the radio station source for information to disseminate concerning COVID-19?

Response: From all the responses, the veritable sources of information about COVID-19 on radio stations were from identifiable sources like the World Health Organisations (WHO), interviews of health professionals on radio programmes, health bulletins and reports, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), online media, and news portals and newspapers. The radio station always monitors the daily briefings by government institutions at the national and sub-national levels.

"The radio station information gathering is sourced via news portals like the News Agency of Nigeria; also by tracking government activities and events concerning the subject both locally and internationally."

FGQ4: How should radio stations act in case fake news or misinformation has earlier emanated from them?

Response: Most of the respondents thought that such a radio station should apologise to the

general public and write a rejoinder on the fake news.

"As a result of the desperation to quench the need for information brought about by panic of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global lockdown that followed, even radio stations can be a victim of misinformation, but at the time truthful information has dislodged the old misinformation. It is the responsibility of the radio station to correct the misinformation and promptly disseminate the correct one."

The above response implies that fake news or misinformation may be sent out by radio stations with unintended consequences. This can undermine the ability of the people to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it is important to inform the people as soon as there is new information to counter the previous error.

FG Q5: What modality does the radio station follow in order to fact-check information before disseminating?

Response: Respondents agreed that radio stations should adopt credible sources, invite experts to programmes, fact-check and verify the sources of information, verify from alternative sources and confirm from international news organisations as guards against the dissemination of fake news.

"The problem of fake news is a legitimate concern especially during a period of major health hazard like COVID-19. When people listen to information on radio stations there is the tendency to accept it as the gospel truth; therefore, it has become imperative to fact-check information from various sources before disseminating; hence, the radio station

ensures that only verified information from identifiable and reliable sources are shared with the community."

FGQ6: What is the role of the radio station as an institution for authenticating information concerning COVID-19?

Response: Making the right information available to the community, fact-checking the authenticity of the information before disseminating and ensuring proper verification.

"As a radio station whose philosophy is to educate and instruct, we do not air or broadcast information concerning COVID-19 that has not been verified."

FG Q7: What do you think is the difference between popular public perception and genuine information?

Response: Popular public perception may not be backed by facts. It may be based on hearsays, gossips and rumours, while genuine information is fact-based and verified. The major difference is knowledge. Public perception may also be a mutual opinion of the people in a society on a definite topic that may be right or wrong.

"Popular public perception might not be credible. Opinion from a respected commentator may form public debate. That doesn't mean those opinions are grounded in fact, logic and knowledge."

"Some public opinion may be driven by ignorance, with mischievous attempts to tarnish the image of an individual, organisation or government to achieve a political advantage. Basically, public opinion may thrive on rumour, while genuine information is fundamentally grounded in logical thinking, sound argument and truth regardless of whether it is a popular opinion or not."

FG Q8: What do you think should be the consequence for the deliberate dissemination of fake news on radio stations?

Response: Dissemination of false information can cause considerable public harm to the reputation of a radio station; therefore, to combat this problem, there should be a measure of control from regulating authorities to uphold the integrity of information, especially during times of public health hazards like COVID-19. Therefore, any radio station violating the guidelines deserves a warning, penalty, sanction, suspension of the radio station, and/or suspension of the newscaster and withdrawal of license to operate.

Results and Findings

Some of the effective strategies that made fake news seem to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic were social media handles and the advent of new technology, self-acclaimed news experts and public commentators. The circumstances and factors that made people believe fake news about COVID-19 are widespread, acclaimed eye witness, idleness and a large social media presence occasioned by lockdown, unemployment, reportage by mainstream media, convincing statistics and social media trends. Allied to what was observed from the journalist at the radio station, Hartley and Khuong (2020) revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were operational failures in governance in coordinating information relating to the COVID-19 outbreak on an international scale concerning policy interventions dependent on confirmable evidence. The urgency of the pandemic necessitated governments to consider the opinions of experts and, at the same time, ensure the translation of their opinions to the public to ensure public understanding. Nevertheless, misinformation and fake news, including content shared on

traditional media and social media, can compromise the value of evidence-based policy interventions and undercut the integrity of scientific capability and possibly lead to longer-term consequences.

The veritable sources of information about COVID-19 on radio stations are the World Health Organisation, interviews with health professionals on radio programmes (Ceadar-Sinai, 2020), health bulletins and reports, the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), online media and news portals and newspapers. Radio stations that carry fake news about COVID-19 should apologise and write a retraction of the fake news. According to Cedars-Sinai (2020), assault on news and information, especially on the coronavirus pandemic, has become challenging and knowing where to access reliable information to assist the general public surrounding the virus is difficult. Lock (2020) observed that during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the level of contradictory information in the public domain, mainly on social media, was shocking. Some of the news is backed up by experts, but there are many unfounded rumours and speculations that cannot be backed up by facts. Misinformation has undercut the global determination to follow acceptable health and hygiene practices; thus, individuals and the general public are at greater risk.

Radio stations should adopt fact-checking, credible sources of news, bring experts on programmes and verify the sources of information as modalities to ensure that the information being disseminated is true and not fake. In the opinion of Ephraim (2020), reliable sources constitute the most important way of fighting misinformation, which should be from health experts working on the treatment or prevention of the spread of the coronavirus with direct accuracy and knowledge. The author suggested that radio stations should

collaborate with professionals in the scientific and health sectors, as well as NGOs in the COVID-19 related field. However, the author observed that lockdowns and social distancing measures imposed had limited the ability of reporters to visit locations to investigate the health problem physically. Reporters are also encouraged to visit the official website of the international organisation at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19.

It was found that the major difference between popular public perception and truthful information is that facts do not back up popular public perception. It is based on hearsays, gossips and rumours, while truthful information is fact-based and verified. The significant difference is knowledge. All the respondents agreed that warning and sanction/suspension should be some of the punishments meted out to radio stations that deliberately disseminate fake news without verification.

Factors like conspiracy theories, deliberate non-usage of protective materials and being a victim of fake news determine people's belief in fake news or otherwise (Shahsavari, 2020). As coronavirus continues to ravage the world, information relating to its origins, cures, vaccines and suitable reactions is ripping through social media and leading the news cycle. Although several stories in the news media are fact-based, many of those circulating on social media are subjective and unreliable, purely based on groundless speculation, wishful thinking or conspiratorial fantasy.

Implication of the Study

The study established that social media handles and the advent of new technology, self-acclaimed news experts and public commentators were some of the strategies used to confirm fake news during the COVID-19 outbreak. The study also indicated that

acclaimed eyewitnesses, idleness and extensive social media presence, occasioned by the lockdown, unemployment and reportage by mainstream media, convincing statistics and social media trends were some of the factors and circumstances that made people believe fake news about COVID-19. This implies that social media availability and use contributed to the spread of fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the lockdown. Many people were idle, so spreading fake news or information about COVID-19 became the norm. In addition, the findings of this study have implications for reporters, radio station houses and government.

For the reporters, this study has indicated that they should visit the official website of the international organisations at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 to get adequate and genuine information about the virus. On the part of the radio stations, the study confirmed that radio stations should adopt fact-checking, credible sources of news and verification of the sources of their information to ensure that the information being disseminated is true and not fake. On the part of the government, they should initiate policies that would checkmate the excesses of fake news spread from radio stations so that reporters and radio stations will be mindful of the type and source of information they disseminate to the general public. Government should also develop a legal framework through legislative intervention to deal with radio stations that betray public trust by allowing fake news to spread.

Conclusion

The roles and responsibilities of radio stations in combating fake news or misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be over-emphasised. This is because fake news is fabricated or misleading information offered as news, which is harmful to people and

organisations such as radio stations. Fake news has led to an enormous deal of propaganda whereby a significant number of individuals believe in a piece of information without checking the accuracy of such information. Thus, it is pertinent to educate individuals through media literacy by using radio stations to disseminate information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that social media handles and the advent of new technology, self-acclaimed news experts and public commentators were the practical strategies that made fake news seem to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study also established that radio stations should adopt fact-checking, credible sources of news, invite experts on programmes and verify the sources of information as modalities to ensure that information being disseminated is not fake news but fact. However, lockdowns and social distancing measures imposed by the federal government and insecurity in some parts of the country have limited reporters' ability to visit locations to investigate the health problem physically. They are encouraged to visit the official website of international organisations at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19, such as the WHO, to get information on the number of people infected, statistics of deaths, recoveries and vaccinations. The study confirmed that the major difference between popular public perception and truthful information is that facts do not back up popular public perception;

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instead, it is based on hearsays, gossips and rumours, while genuine information is fact-based and verified. The significant difference is knowledge.

Recommendation

As a result of the negative consequences of misinformation, especially during the time of health emergencies like COVID-19, legal action should be taken against any radio station spreading unconfirmed information. New guidelines should be set up to empower relevant authorities to act against media houses involved in deliberately sharing inaccurate information about the virus.

Media personnel should be trained to apply time-tested methods for verifying the authenticity of information and weigh the implications for the general public. They must adopt the use of the 5 C's of Critical Consuming: Context (looking at the context of the reportage); Credibility (cross-checking the reliability of the information); Construction (scrutinising the structure of the information); Corroboration (validating the information acquired with other dependable news sources); Compare (equating information obtained with other sources to get different viewpoints).

The department of the Ministry of Health responsible for infectious diseases should be the authorised disseminator of information and statistics in relation to COVID-19.

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