

Towards Overcoming Challenges of Risk Communication on Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study focuses on overcoming challenges of risk communication on covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Taking a qualitative approach, the study observes that many efforts by government and other development partners have failed in gaining the support and cooperation of their target beneficiary groups as a result of different factors but more fundamentally as a result of inappropriate and inadequate application of communication. The study, anchored on the cognition dissonance-consonance theory, reveals that the fight against covid-19 by the government of Nigeria is far from being successful consequent upon people's refusal to even believe in the existence of covid-19 and adopt preventive measures put in place to check its spread. This failure, the study believes is caused by inability of the government to apply the right communication strategies in engendering the desired response. The study, therefore, recommends many behavioural change communication strategies among which include application of integrated marketing communication approaches and use of opinion, traditional and religious leaders in this regard.

Keywords: Cognition Dissonance, Covid-19, Pandemic, Risk Communication and Risk Management.

Introduction

It may appear to be a waste of time and energy reiterating that the ability of man and his environment to serve and develop is dependent on one fundamental factor of communication. When one of the former American Presidents, Thomas Jefferson made a philosophical declaration that if faced with the problem of making a choice between government and information, he would not hesitate to forgo government; a statement that is very famous among communication scholars, he was only attesting to the indispensability of communication to society. Collaborating this belief, Chiakaan and Ahmad (2014) have stated that "no society can survive and advance without communication." Sambe (2016) also posits in support of this position that communication serves as an instrument or a vehicle of social interaction as it helps us to understand ourselves and keep in touch with others. Eyre (1983) in Ashiekpe (2012) while supporting the views of others, notes further that communication provides a means by which individuals and organizations act and interact; exchange information and ideas; develop plans, proposals and policies; make decisions and manage resources towards the attainment of set goals and objectives.

The ongoing discourse has fundamentally two faces. It implies that the survival, growth and development of any society depends on adequate and effective communication. It also implies that communication is a powerful instrument of development. The recognition and appreciation of communication, in this regard, is what, according to famous communication scholars like Grunig (1992) and Lantican (2003), Ugande (2007), Chiakaan and Tsafa (2020) and others has made communication to be used by government and development agencies generally in order to attain their goals of improving on the welfare of people and society. This is what is referred to as development communication or communication for development.

Development agencies communicate, according to James, Ode and Soola (1990) in Sambe (2016) for different purposes of informing, educating, entertaining, persuading and so on. Summarily, communication by development agencies, including government is aimed at changing the behaviour and attitude of a group of people target for a particular policy or programme towards accepting and supporting such a policy for its success. This implies that communication has to be not only effectively applied but it also has to be strategically applied. Where communication is not applied as desired, no matter how beneficial a policy may be, it may suffer resistance and rejection by the people target to benefit from it. This situation often arises particularly where communication is aimed at making a target group adopt a particular habit or lifestyle that can save it from a particular danger.

When people are being communicated with in order to prevent them from incurring risk associated with certain practices, problems and behaviours for the interest of their health and general wellbeing economically and socially inclined, it is professionally referred to as risk communication. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) defines risk communication as the exchange of real time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threat to their health, economic or social wellbeing.

Human life in society is full of many circumstances endangering its general wellbeing. This explains why communication is required in managing such circumstances or issues as the case with covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Historically, coronavirus, otherwise referred to as Covid-19 broke out in Wuhan, a city in China in December 2019. The disease was declared a pandemic in February 2020 by WHO as it fastly spread and affected the whole world claiming millions of lives. Covid-19 has actually led to unprecedented international public health challenges including mandatory social distancing and prolonged school closures (Abrams and Greenhawt, 2020). Contributing to the history and challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, Chiakaan and Tsafa (2020, p.13) state;

The Covid-19 was so dreadful that almost all nations closed their borders, restricting citizens of other countries from entering their lands. Educational, football, political, economic, religious, in fact, major activities were suspended. The disease brought untold hardships on the whole world.

In Nigeria, the first index case of Covid-19 was recorded on February 27, 2020. The virus was brought into the country by an infected Italian citizen who arrived Lagos from Europe. Since then, the virus has spread throughout the country with over 58,000 confirmed cases as at 28th September, 2020 according to the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The most dreadful aspect of the Covid-19 is unavailability of a drug or vaccine that can cure or prevent its spread. This pathetic situation implies that the only means available for managing the highly contagious virus is communication. Government and relevant agencies automatically employed communication in creating awareness, building understanding and persuading Nigerians to accept and adopt measures that can prevent them from not only contracting it but preventing its spread. Some of the measures in this regard put in place include;

- i. Internal lockdown of the local economy
- ii. Closure of schools, churches, mosques, markets and social gatherings of any type.
- iii. Social distancing, maintaining 2 metres distance
- iv. Frequent washing of hands under running water and use of hand sanitizers.
- v. Isolation of infected persons.
- vi. Testing and contact tracing
- vii. Mandatory use of face masks
- viii. Avoid touching of eyes, nose and mouth.
- ix. Cleaning and disinfecting of high-touch surfaces such as doorknobs, light switches, electronics and counters.
- x. Covering of mouths and nose with one's elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing.

Fundamentally, the outbreak of Covid-19 has greatly affected the general behavioural pattern of humanity with increasing need to adjust and readjust on the day-to-day behaviour of Nigerians. This has resulted in what is now referred to as the 'new normal' which is a range of new behavioural pattern required to control the virus. With the relaxation of the Covid-19 lockdown resulting in reopening of the economy and schools, the need for accurate and effective communication becomes more necessary in order to reduce the chances of spike of the virus. Incidentally, communication efforts by government and other relevant stakeholders in this regard seem not to be yielding fruitful results thereby creating fears that the country may likely experience another total lockdown. This fear, as expressed by government, is as a result of the non-cooperative attitude of Nigerians in adopting measures that could halt the rampant spread of the disease. This implies that communication aimed at managing the risks associated with Covid-19 has failed. This further, more importantly, implies that there are some challenges facing risk communication in this case. How the challenges can be overcome is the thrust of this study.

Statement of Problem

Risk communication management is better explained as the kind of communication that is aimed at making people adopt measures that can prevent them from anything that can serve as a threat to their health, economic and social wellbeing (WHO, 2020). Usually, communication according to many scholars including Ashiekpe (2012), Aliede (2012), Sambe (2016) and Glik (2007) does not record success on the platter of gold as it is often bedevilled with some challenges such as over multiplicity of sources of information, resistance, cultural influence, lack of accurate and effective information and so on which must be overcome. Communication effort by the Nigerian government and other relevant stakeholders towards managing Covid-19 virus in Nigeria, therefore, was far from being successful due to certain challenges. This position is premised on the belief of many Nigerians openly expressed that Covid-19 was a rich man's disease; it did not exist in Nigeria; government was only hiding under the guise of the virus to cover its underperformance and many factors. Their non-cooperative attitude with the government, in this regard, was reflected in their nonchalant attitude towards adopting measures that were designed to prevent them from not only contracting the disease but also preventing its spread. This situation even created apprehension that the Federal Government even thought of locking down activities in the country for the second time. Since by its nature, risk communication often faces challenges thereby leading to national disaster, it becomes expedient to come up with measures that can address the challenges. This study, therefore, provides a panacea to the challenges of risk communication management with emphasis on Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Risk Communication Management

Although there are myriad definitions of communication, Ajala (2001) has noted that examining them critically will reveal one thing about communication which is information transmission. This implies that communication deals with message or information transmission. If this position is agreed with, it therefore means that two parties are involved in the process of communication. Baran (2001) identifies the parties as sender and receiver. The sender, otherwise referred to as the communicator, is the one, according to Sambe (2016) with an idea or message to share with the receiver. The message being shared, in this regard, implies that communication is not a one-way traffic; it does not begin from the sender and ends with the receiver. When the receiver receives the message from the sender, he interprets and responds to it in form of feedback. Feedback in the process of communication is very important because it makes communication to be complete and genuine. It makes the sender of the message determine whether his message is understood or not; it also makes the sender to determine the readiness or not of the receiver to partake in the communication and do what the sender wants him to do or not (Ahmad, 2014).

Any communication that does not care for feedback is equal to propaganda and is likely to fail. This belief is what informs communication scholars such as Wright (1975), Sambe (2016), Ugande (2007), Soola (2003) and many others to submit that any definition of communication that neglects communication as a sharing exercise is not only dubious, unacceptable but unprofessional. Wright, for instance, defines communication as a social process that is fundamental and vital to human survival. Fiske (1990) in Okunna (1999, p.5) considers communication as “a social interaction through message.” Where communication is a process, it connotes the fact that there is interaction between the parties thereby making it possible for them to understand themselves. From a sociological perspective, this implies that communication brings about understanding, acceptability and cooperation.

Armed with the general definition of communication, it becomes a less herculean task to come to terms with what risk communication management entails. From a common sense perspective, risk communication management simply entails the application of communication approaches in managing a situation that can endanger the lives of people medically, economically, socially and even politically. It is about effective and adequate utilization of communication by a development agency, governmental or non-governmental organization in ensuring safety of lives and properties leading to an economically, socially and politically healthy environment for development purposes.

In line with this submission, the WHO (2020) defines risk communication as “the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to health, economic or social wellbeing. Also sharing a similar position, Eisenman, Cordasco, Asch, Golden and Glik (2007) have defined risk communication as “the process of passing information on hazards to potentially exposed individuals, groups and communities within the framework of public health and environmental disaster response.”

Fundamentally, hazard prevention and management is the concern of risk communication. Information, based on the foregoing discourse, is required from experts, authorities and or government to concerned people about an issue or occurrence that can endanger them and the society in one way or the other. This automatically brings to the fold that information from government, its agencies and other related ones about covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria is the jurisdiction of risk communication management.

Information, in this regard, is expected to be very accurate, usually originating from constituted authorities or bodies or experts so as to save lives, properties and guarantee the survival and growth of society economically and socially. Information is required to arrest rumours. Rumour does not have authentic source; it usually has multiple and unidentified sources with destructive tendency. In corroborating this view, Briand (2020) states that risk communication is an investment; a preventive measure, a vaccine against rumours and misinformation.

Covid 19 Pandemic

There is hardly any discussion in Nigeria and, of course, the whole world that can take place without the word 'covid 19' being mentioned. Media stories in the broadcast, print and social are dominated with covid-19. Incidentally, many people in Africa and Nigeria particularly, if asked what covid 19 is, can simply refer to it as China's disease "a rich man's disease," "a Whiteman's disease" and so on. Yes, even though they may not be totally wrong, the truth is that in a true search for the definition of the concept, their positions cannot be accepted. The World Health Organizations (2020) defines covid-19 which is also referred to as coronavirus as "a large family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)." The coronavirus based on the WHO's submission are viruses belonging to one family which usually, if contracted, attack the respiratory organs in the body resulting in difficulty in breathing. The disease is associated with common cough and sneeze, thereby making it to be highly contagious. It spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes (WHO, 2020). Media reports from the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and WHO have shown that people who are infected with coronavirus usually show the following common signs; fever, cough and tiredness. Early symptoms can include loss of taste or smell. Other symptoms can include shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing, muscle aches, chills, sore throats, running nose, headache, chest pain and pink eye (conjunctivitis). The severity of the symptoms could range from very mild to severe.

Even though several efforts have been made and are being made by experts to develop a drug or a vaccine that can either cure people or prevent them from contracting the disease and halting its spread, all the efforts are yet to yield a positive outcome. The number of infected persons in Nigeria and globally grows on a daily basis. This implies that accurate information is the only means of managing the disease currently. Information is required to keep people aware of the dangers associated with the disease, sources of contracting it, where to go in case of contraction, and many other things associated with the disease.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the constituency theories. The constituency theories are so called because they offer similar explanations to human behaviour in relation to a message that seeks to achieve change. Four theories exist in this regard; they are the cognitive dissonance theory formulated by Leon Festinger in 1957, balance theory by Fritz Heider in 1946 and 1958, consistency theory by Charles Osgood and Percy Tannenbaum in 1955 as well as affective cognitive consistency theory formulated in 1956 by Resenberg (Wiley Library, 2013).

From a common sense perspective, the theories are of the position that human beings have belief system which they hold on and which they feel is the best. Unfortunately, a message that is meant for them that challenges such a belief or cognition may be likely rejected.

Ramaswamy and Namakumari (2009, p.661) further shade light on the consistency theories thus;

The consistency theories rest on basic ideas that man seeks consistency, balance and harmony in his belief system. He cannot tolerate inconsistencies and imbalance for long. He always tries to solve the inconsistencies --- when (they) occur between the existing belief system of the individual and new information to which he gets exposed, the given attitude will tend to change in such a way that the inconsistency gets resolved.

Additionally, Chiakaan and Ahmad (2014, p.9) have stated that “communication may fail if the source delivers a piece of information which challenges the belief of the receiver, any message that is contrary to what the receiver has already known and is used to, is likely to be rejected.” Usually, met with this kind of challenge, the receiver will go out seeking confirmation from other sources in order to overcome the tension he is subjected to.

Fundamentally, in order to solve dissonance oriented problem, Sambe (2016) and other behavioural communication scholars have suggested that the communicator of the message should be seen by the receiver as not only being credible but honest and faithful. The communicator is also expected to apply the principle of reinforcement rather than condemnation in changing the behaviour of the receiver.

The relevance of consistency theories to this studies lies in the fact that they provide a guide to government and other agencies involved in the use of communication to make Nigerians believe and adopt measures that can prevent the spread of covid-19 on how they can be successful in this regard. This is because the major problem confronting information on covid-19 is resistance.

Challenges of Risk Communication Management in the Face of Covid-19 in Nigeria

The Federal Government of Nigeria, through the President, Mohammadu Buhari and his assistants, as reported severally by the media, have expressed fear that Nigeria might still be experiencing a second wave of coronavirus rage if care is not taken. The government in this regard, is thinking about locking down activities in the country for the second time. This position clearly states that the battle against the coronavirus is far from being a success. Obviously, the conduct of Nigerians in public places including political rallies, schools, markets, religious gatherings and other gatherings does not show that they care about covid-19; many cannot wear face masks; cannot avoid shaking of hands, care less about maintaining social distancing and so on. This is a clear indication that communication aimed at managing covid-19 by the government is a failure. Of course, this failure is as a result of many challenges which include;

- i. Resistance:** Resistance is a key challenge to risk communication. Often people have to adopt a particular lifestyle or sacrifice time and other resources for the interest of the change that is expected of them. Changing one’s behaviour or

lifestyle, does not come easy; it is always faced with resistance. This is, therefore, one of the fundamental factors that is hindering the success of communication against covid-19 in Nigeria. Nigerians find it strange to distance themselves, avoid shaking of hands, keep away from their true relatives and so on. These are automatically against the culture of Nigerians, hence the rejection of messages in respect to the covid-19 virus. Often, when a message is contrary to the cultural belief of a group it is meant for, resistance, as reveals by Sambe (2016), occurs. Also in acknowledgement of resistance as a key issue in risk communication, Moemeka (2000, p.24) states;

There are major causes of resistance to change. Lack of work ethic, or competitive spirit, socially sanction unwillingness to accept new ideas and lack of socialization in certain key values like upward mobility and achievement, motivation as well as strong belief and trust in traditional ways of doing things constitute constant barriers.

- ii. **Lack of Full Awareness:** When there is lack of adequate and effective application of communication strategies by a development agency concerning a programme it is out to execute for the interest of a target group, there is every possibility that it cannot succeed. The failure is necessary as the target group meant to benefit from the programme will not be adequately exposed to it. The target beneficiary group, because of lack of exposure to the programme, will be unwilling to cooperate and participate in it. This problem appears to be another challenge to communication strategies by government against covid-19 in Nigeria. The government does not employ the right communication approach adequately to create full awareness, build understanding, stimulate interest and acceptability as well as participation in the covid-19 project. The lack of awareness by majority of Nigerians also results in what development communicators call psychological barriers as they cannot support the programme against covid-19 from their hearts individually.
- iii. **Lack of Trust and Confidence in Government:** The dominant opinion of Nigerians expressed in the media and different fora show that they do not have trust and confidence in the government. This is based on their perceived failure of the government to deliver on its promises. Many Nigerians are crying of lack of security, good roads, fallen standard of education, decayed health care system, high corruption and so on. These have made them not to have trust and confidence in the current government especially as it keeps promising a better and improved performance. Nigerians cannot believe information on covid-19 due to their perceived incredibility of the government. Source credibility is a very key ingredient of communication success in this regard.
- iv. **Poverty:** Added to lack of trust and confidence in the government by Nigerians is high poverty. Mohammed (2017, p.21) asserts that; the nature of extreme poverty is recognized by very low income, subsistence and unskilled wage

labour as the dominant income source, food as the dominant consumption good, low education and high illiteracy, minority language group status and rural location point to an unsustainably high cost and relatively low benefit of direct internet service provision through tele-centres to the poor.

From a very simple perspective, poverty can be described as a situation where a person or community members have a very low income base that makes it impossible for them to meet their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter (Chiakaan & Tsafa, 2020).

It is perhaps waste of energy to say that there is high poverty in Nigeria. Covid-19 pandemic incidentally has come when poverty is the order of the day in Nigeria. Many Nigerians cannot afford food, clothes, accommodation, education, water, electricity and so on. In this precarious and pathetic situation, there is a lockdown order, preventing Nigerians from going out and struggling for their daily needs. This, no doubt is met with stiff resistance.

- v. **Rumours and too much Information:** Rumours are unverified accounts or explanations which spread from person to person, but whose veracity may not be quickly or even confirmed. The outbreak of covid-19 in the world and its reported presence in Nigeria are accompanied with various stories from different unconfirmed and unreliable sources. This is worsened by the activities of citizen journalists on the social media. There are so many pieces of information on the social media whose sources are difficult to verify. Some stories about the covid-19, in this regard, are that the disease can only be contracted by old people; it can only kill old people; the disease is ordinary cough and catarrh that people are used to; the disease is only meant for the rich; the disease can be early killed by hot water, ginger, onions, pepper and alcohol. There is too much information about the disease that people find it difficult to identify which one is authentic and reliable and which one is not.
- vi. **Unstrategic Communication Approach:** From all indications, it appears that the government is not very strategic in applying communication in the fight against covid-19. Risk communication or crisis communication, as it is sometimes called, has to be strategically inclined. Chiakaan and Chile (2015) posit strategic communication as the kind of communication that is unique as it is specially planned, designed and applied towards achieving a specific objective. In strategic communication, depending on the objective of the communication, two or more approaches may be required. This also calls for using the right media to reach the target group with messages. A critical observation of the communication strategy used by the government in the fight against covid-19 in Nigeria will reveal that government is more inclined to creating awareness about covid-19 and persuading Nigerians to accept and

adopt preventive measures through news, public announcements and advertising with the broadcast media of radio and television being used in this regard. The social media is also being used especially in texting messages by NCDC about the covid-19 to Nigerians.

While these communication approaches and the media adopted are appreciated, professionally, given the magnitude of the disease, they remain inadequate in mobilising Nigerians fully against the pandemic. Over reliance on broadcast media and to some extent, social media is, therefore, another challenge faced by risk communication about covid-19 in Nigeria.

Communication Approaches in Managing Covid-19 in Nigeria

In the rendezvous of victory, it is said that everybody's participation is required. This simply implies that covid-19, being a national issue needs collective attention and efforts in order to successfully manage it. An Integrated Communication approach which Belch and Belch (2018) refers to as Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) should be sincerely and committedly applied. Adopting this approach requires the following;

- i. Advertising:** Advertising has the power of not only creating awareness but it also has the power to influence Nigerians to believe that covid-19 is real and adopt measures designed to halt its spread. Advertising messages, in this regard should pass through different media including, radio, television, newspapers, magazines, social media, posters and so on. Apart from direct advertising, corporate advertising can be very helpful as it has the capacity of influencing believability more easily.
- ii. Personal Selling:** This requires direct face-to-face contact with Nigerians with information about covid-19. Government agents, especially health workers can go out and interact with Nigerians, especially those in the rural areas, explain to them what covid-19 is and what can be done to prevent contracting and spreading it. The advantage of this strategy is that the doubting Nigerians will have the opportunity to not only have physical interaction with experts but also hear from them instead of other unknown unverifiable sources.
- iii. Public Relations:** Among the various definitions of public relations that gain acceptability from Nwosu (2004), Keghku (2005), Chile (2003) and other scholars is the definition that posits public relations as “good deeds, publicly appreciated.” This implies that when a government, company or agency is known for good performance; living up to its promises, it can be appreciated by its publics. Where this is the case, people can have trust and confidence in such an agency. The benefit of the trust and confidence is that the publics can never hesitate to patronise whatever comes from such an agency. Incidentally, the Nigerian government is seriously suffering from trust deficit. This has made people to be doubtful about whatever message that comes from it. People cannot

believe the government that covid-19 is real; they think that the government is only lying to collect money from local and international donors for the selfish interest of the cabals. The government should, therefore, strive to achieve credibility which is a product of political public relations.

- iv. **Sales Promotions:** This requires embarking on such other activities that can assist the government in reaching Nigerians with information on covid-19 and influencing them to adopt preventive measures against it. Part of sales promotion here can involve sponsoring activities that can help in this regard. It also involves, apart from media campaigns, employing communication experts, artists such as musicians and comedians to come out with pieces of music and embark on other activities that can help communicate information about covid-19 adequately and persuasively.
- v. **Integrated Media:** Messages and campaigns on covid-19 should not be restricted to a particular medium or selected media; they should not be channelled only through the conventional media of radio, television, newspapers, magazines and posters; the other media such as social and traditional media should also be employed.
- vi. **Involving Leaders:** Traditional, opinion, religious and leaders of various groups and associations can help in creating awareness and influencing their people to adopt measures that can help in fighting covid-19 in Nigeria. This position is anchored on the two-step flow theory of communication.

Conclusion

This study has examined measures towards overcoming challenges of risk communication on covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study is findings reveal that the use of communication by government to ensure that Nigerians believe in the existence of covid-19 in the country and adopt measures put in place to prevent them from contracting and spreading it has not been successful. Currently, Nigerians still do not feel that coronavirus is real. They have different negative perceptions about the disease despite efforts by the government to change these perceptions to positive using the tool of communication. Incidentally, government inability to be successful, in this regard, is fundamentally a product of inadequate and ineffective application of communication among other factors. In order to be successful, in changing the behaviour of Nigerians towards covid-19, appropriate risk communication approaches as recommended earlier should be employed by the government. Government should employ the services of communication scholars fully in designing and implementing persuasive communication campaigns that can create awareness and convince Nigerians to believe in the existence of covid-19 and cooperate in the fight against it.

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