

Epidemics, Fears and the Mass Media: An Analysis of the 2014 Ebola Virus Disease Outbreak in Nigeria.

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Abstract

This paper proposes that the increasing rate of anxieties and fears which literature reveals as characteristic of most severe outbreak of diseases can be significantly mitigated if the monitorial, facilitative and collaborative roles of the media as posited by Christians et al. (2009) are effectively taken up prior to, during and after such outbreaks. Drawing specifically on the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Nigeria and Vanguard's coverage of the outbreak, this paper establishes the place of fears during epidemics while arguing that even though fears and epidemics cannot be said to be mutually exclusive, the excessive anxieties and fears that characterise most outbreaks can be lessened. This paper, embedded within the qualitative research design, employs a case study approach and an integrative review of academic literature and relevant reports on Ebola Virus Disease. The paper suggests the need for conscious and deliberate partnership between the mainstream media, outbreak response teams and all stakeholders while also outlining the need for the mass media to be incorporated as primary stakeholders in outbreak and risk communications if anxieties and fears must be lessened during epidemics.

Key Words: Epidemics, Fears, Mass Media, Ebola Virus Disease

Introduction

In recent years, Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) has been reported in certain countries and communities in Africa with efforts currently geared to permanently halt the ongoing outbreak in the North Kivu and Ituri provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Williams et al., 2018; World Health Organization Report, 2018; Cohen, 2018; Kettley, 2018). In the wake of these recent outbreaks, this paper suggests that while it can be advocated that fears and epidemics are not mutually exclusive, the excessive anxieties and fears that characterises most epidemics caused by outbreaks of infectious diseases can be lessened if the mass media takes up deliberate and effective communication strategies prior to, during and after such outbreaks. Specifically, this paper draws on the 2014 EVD outbreak in Nigeria and *Vanguard's* coverage of the outbreak. *Vanguard* a print medium headquartered in Lagos State, Nigeria has a substantial coverage of the EVD outbreak

(Nwanne 2014) and the electronic copies of the news reports and articles disseminated during the 2014 epidemic episode are readily available and accessible.

This paper also draws on the normative theories and agenda setting function of the mass media as theoretical framework alongside relevant health reports and academic literature. Gleaning from these, this paper posits that the fears that characterise epidemics such as the 2014 EVD outbreak can be significantly lessened if the monitorial, facilitative and collaborative roles of the media are effectively taken up by mass media organisations. This paper however brings to the fore the need for conscious partnership between the mass media, outbreak response teams and all stakeholders in containing outbreaks of infectious diseases while also outlining the need for the mass media to be incorporated as primary stakeholders in outbreak and risk communications if anxieties and fears must be lessened during epidemic episodes.

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The first section of this paper presents an overview of fears, epidemics and the mass media while the second section presents EVD as an epidemic and then draws on the 2014 outbreak in Nigeria. The third section presents an outline of the theoretical postulations that provide the framework for this paper while the fourth section presents the analysis and discussion. The fifth section outlines the summary and conclusion.

Epidemics, Fears and the Mass Media

Although the nature of the relationship between the mass media and the society is continually debated and contested across different contexts, the mass media's centrality to social life and communication however is less contested as evident in relevant literature (Dagenais & Raboy 1992; Nicholas & O'Malley 2013; Croteau & Hoynes 2014). Nicholas & O'Malley further states that the mass media acts as 'the main conduit through which ideas circulate in societies' thereby organising and determining the way ideas and information flow across different spheres in our day to day activities (2013, 1). However, the mass media while playing a major role in organising and determining the flow of ideas and news has severally been linked to the generation and propagation of fear during different episodes of social unrest (Nicholas & O'Malley 2013; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 2011; Cohen 1972) though researchers differ on the 'nature of this connection and direction of its influence' (Altheide 1997, 648). While, Seale (2002) brings to the fore the claim and complaints of health educationists regarding the dissemination of inaccurate and distorted health related messages, Williams (2013) more specifically asserts that print media organisations in most countries generally have as part of their history the business of irrational fear mongering and creation of panic and popular anxiety about social problems. Furthermore, the propensity for fears to be generated through certain media productions by the broadcast media has also been brought to the fore in literature (Cantor 2002; Hoekstra et al 1999). Drawing on Cantor's (2002, 288) conceptualisation of fear, this paper refers to fears as emotional responses that involve components of anxiety, distress, panic and increased physiological arousal. Such responses commonly appear in consumers of media messages and are related to avoidance or

escape due to the perception of real or imagined threat.

These emotional laden responses to certain mass media messages have the tendency to adversely affect the health status of consumers of such messages. Panter-Brick & Worthman (1999) asserts that health status at any point in time is an outcome of the interaction of constitutional with external domains through complex pathways that operates over time. The mass media however plays a role in the inter-play of this interaction during disease outbreaks as residents in communities and cities where such are recorded largely rely on disseminated mass media messages for information and knowledge (Hofstetter, Schultze & Mulvihill 1992; Clarke & Everest 2006; Herring & Swedlund 2010; Akingbade, 2017).

The epidemic episodes that come as a major unrest in communities/countries arguably cause the spread of fear and anxiety (Glassner 2000 as cited in Boero 2007; Kinsman 2012) which can be linked directly or otherwise in different degrees to mass media messages disseminated during such episodes. Additionally, Seale (2002) asserts that the mass media's usage of military metaphors in reporting outbreaks of infectious diseases evoke unpleasant imageries that contribute to a culture of fear that has gradually been generated in the past few decades. Recent EVD outbreaks in affected West African states alongside news reports and images that depicted EVD's high infection rate and speed in causing gruesome deaths created the tendency for infected people to avoid surveillance thereby increasing the rate of rumour, anxiety and horror that spread faster than the virus (Chan 2014; Umeora et al. 2014). Drawing on the 2014 EVD outbreak in Nigeria and specifically on *Vanguard's* coverage of the outbreak, this paper contributes to the on-going body of trans-disciplinary research work on epidemics.

EVD as an epidemic and the 2014 outbreak in Nigeria

The first recorded outbreaks of EVD characterised by high fever, headache, abdominal pain, vomiting and diarrhoea occurred almost simultaneously in Sudan and the DRC between June and November 1976 with respective mortality rates of 53% and 89% (Pourrut et al., 2005; Chowell et al., 2004; Shiwani et al., 2017). Resurgences occurred in

1977, and between 1994 and 1997 (Feldmann et al., 2004; Takada & Yoshihiro, 2001). However, available literature reveals that the evolutionary history of EVD, which includes the reservoir of the zoonotic pathogens causing the virus and its routes of primary transmission to humans and nonhumans, remains a continuing subject of research and study (World Health Organization Report, 2018). Li & Chen (2014) and Gatherer (2014), corroborated by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) and the International Committee on the Taxonomy of Viruses, posit that EVD is a potential bioterrorism agent which belongs to the genus *filovirus* of the family virus *filoviridae* and was transmitted to the human population through contact with the secretion of blood or other bodily fluids of infected animals.

Also, the report by WHO(2018) reveals that while early supportive care with rehydration and symptomatic treatment enhances survival, EVD currently has no proven and licensed treatment though a range of blood, immunological and drug therapies are under development. EVD is transmitted within humans through direct contact with the secretion of blood, organs or other bodily fluids of infected people and with contaminated surfaces and materials (Chippaux, 2014; WHO, 2018).

Although, EVD occurred in relatively frequent interval over the past three decades with most outbreaks in central Africa (Fowler et al. 2014; Bausch et al. 2008), the first recorded West African victim was in Ivory Coast in 1994 (Gatherer, 2014; Dixon & Schafer, 2014, Pourrut et al. 2005). Also, major resurgences of EVD that spanned five countries, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone has been recorded(Chan, 2014; Fowler et al., 2014). This epidemic led to WHO's then declaration of EVD as a public health emergency of international concern in West Africa on 8 August 2014 (WHO, 2014). This resurgence of EVD in West Africa remains the most severe outbreak on record, unprecedented in size and geographical distribution, with more cases and deaths than all previous outbreaks (Chan, 2014; Fasina et al., 2014; Dixon & Schafer, 2014; Fisman, Khoo & Tuite, 2014). EVD outbreak which remains a major threat to humans and wildlife has over the years been recorded to usually create alarm and fear in communities and nations where it emerges (Chan 2014; Pourrut et al. 2005; Muyembe et al. 2012). This speaks to the place of fear as part of the

characteristics that accompany outbreaks of EVD.

The outbreak of EVD was first reported in Nigeria on 20 July 2014 when a passenger (Patrick Sawyer), having developed symptoms while aboard a commercial airplane, flew from Liberia into Lagos state(Fasina et al. 2014). This outbreak in Nigeria was reported as the first time EVD was recorded in the country and the first time the viral disease has spread through air travel (Shuaib et al. 2014; Chan 2014; Gatherer 2014; Legrand et al. 2007; Dixon & Schafer 2014).

The realisation that EVD in Nigeria was the first recorded case of the viral disease's spread through air travel coupled with the understanding that it has no medically proven cure led to heightened anxieties and fears across several countries as flights to and from Nigeria were highly restricted (Fasina, et al. 2014; Shuaib et al. 2014). These heightened anxieties and fears that characterised the EVD outbreak in Nigeria was at a higher degree compared with previous EVD outbreaks in other countries and was further deepened by sensationalist media reports and images that led to wide-spread apprehension (Umeora et al. 2014; Fasina, et al. 2014). Although, previous EVD outbreaks has always been characterised with anxieties and fears, additional perspectives on why certain mass media reportage has the propensity to heighten fears, drawing on *Vanguard's* 2014 EVD coverage in Nigeria, is brought to the fore in this paper while consequently foregrounding the mainstream media's strategic place in lessening these fears.

Normative theories and Agenda setting function of the Media

The normative theories of the media as posited by Christians et al. (2009) are useful in this paper because these theories provide a relatively unified body of explanatory resources useful in delineating the strategic positions and roles mass media organisations can take up to mitigate epidemics. Christians et al. assert that normative elements depend on personal ideals of professionals in the field of broad communication (2009:69) and posit that journalists play four general important roles in the society. The term role as used here refers to a journalistic concept that embodies a composite of occupational tasks and purposes widely recognised and regulated within an institutional framework (2009:119). The four normative

media roles posited by Christians et al. include the monitorial, facilitative, radical and collaborative roles. While the radical role will not be drawn on in this paper, the monitorial, facilitative and collaborative roles of the media, which speaks largely to the aim of this paper, will provide framework for the analysis and discussion.

Furthermore, drawing on the agenda-setting function of the media, originally coined by McCombs & Shaw (1972) the unique platform the media holds in creating awareness, steering attention to issues, shaping beliefs, actions and reactions becomes evident. This helps to explain the mass media's role in informing the public about pertinent and local issues (Chaffe & Frank 1996 as cited in Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan 2002). This also speaks to the notion that pictures of reality created by the mass media have implications to varying degrees for personal behaviours by consumers of such information and play a major role in public agenda setting (McCombs, 2002; Riaz, 2008).

Analysis and Discussion

Although, WHO's former Director General, Margaret Chan, and the EVD response team, stressed anxieties and fears generated by EVD deaths as the greatest barrier to overcome by people in the affected West African countries while the outbreaks lasted (Chan, 2014), deliberate and conscious efforts to disseminate accurate information by the mainstream media can however lessen these fears and anxieties. During the EVD outbreak in Nigeria, these fears were evidenced in the resort to non-scientific remedies alongside other behavioural modifications. For instance 'drinking and bathing with salt water' that became a rumoured magical cure for EVD stood as the 'most

celebrated' unscientific claim while the outbreak lasted (Azuzine et al 2015). The barrier these fears generated is linked to several sensationalist media reports and images that use exaggeration and other literary techniques to magnify emotional impact thereby creating pictures of reality that has the propensity to heighten fears (Umeora et al 2014). This speaks to the culture of fear enhanced by unpleasant imageries evoked by media reports, which has continually characterised epidemic episodes for decades (Seale 2002). The tendency for fears to be roused among the consumers of mass media messages during epidemic episodes can be further understood by drawing on the critique that health reporting in general terms and specifically during outbreak of viral diseases significantly lacks depth most especially in the early days of such outbreaks (Shuaib et al. 2014; Odoemelam et al 2014; Pratt, Ha, & Pratt 2002).

The table below presents and discusses some headlines of *Vanguard's* published EVD articles, within the months of July and October 2014, being the period from the start of the outbreak until the time WHO declared Nigeria free of EVD. These headlines are drawn on as samples of articles that have the propensity to either inspire or heighten anxiety, and fear amidst *Vanguard's* readership. The headlines of these EVD articles are presented hinging on assertions that a headline is a unique type of text and an important part of the way in which the article appeals to the reader. Headlines present articles in a minimum number of words while displaying significant linguistic and graphological features (Chiluwa 2012). These EVD reports presented below are articles that either laid emphasis on the mortality rate of EVD or conveyed anxiety and fear not just as headlines but as a major theme of the article.

Table 1: Headlines of the Vanguard Newspaper on EVD

July	-Ebola: panic spreads (Front page news); July 31, 2014 -Ebola fever' grips the world; July 31, 2014
August	-Anxiety in Edo community as man dies of suspected Ebola symptoms; August 11, 2014 -Ebola kills 56 in two days says WHO; August 13, 2014
September	-Liberia braces for worst as Ebola death toll jumps; September 9, 2014 -Ebola's death hits 2,400 as Cuba pledges medics; September 12, 2014
October	-UN pleads for more money to combat Ebola as fears mount; October 18, 2014 -Third UN employee dies from Ebola; October 20, 2014

Ebola: panic spreads

The EVD article, with the above headline, is a front page news story published on 31 July 2014 by *Vanguard*. This headline creates and conveys a brief summary and situation report of the epidemic that has found its way into Nigeria. However, this headline made up of three words is capable of evoking fears and fuelling panic amidst the readership. The catchy headline is not just semantically captivating but creates an imagery which potentially can fan embers of anxiety and fear which is already inherent as a result of the outbreak earlier on in the month of July. While 'Ebola' in the headline above can be interpreted as the theme of the news report, the other two words 'panic spreads' accompanying the virus and name of the epidemic makes it easy not just to grab the attention of readers but to create a visual imagery of a fast growing tension and anxiety all over the country.

Drawing on Chiluba's assertion that most times readers merely read the headlines and the lead without reading the entire text (2012, 43), coupled with the understanding that headlines on front pages of newspapers are often printed in bold letters thereby occupying larger space than regular texts, it can be asserted that this headline has the propensity to heighten fears. This bold headline on the front page of *Vanguard* emphasises in its first paragraph that panic has spread among Nigerians as a result of the death of Sawyer, the first EVD index case in Nigeria, and thereby creates an imagery which can contribute to heightening the tension in the country.

Ebola fever' grips the world

This article published 31 July 2014 speaks to the death of Sawyer in Nigeria and also speaks to the two people that were quarantined in separate instances in Hong Kong and in the United Kingdom for showing symptoms similar to that of EVD after visits to Africa. This alongside the outbreaks in

Nigeria and other West African countries led to the article with the above headline. This headline, considering the choice of words and the visual imagery it has the tendency to evoke, has the propensity to inspire fear and panic across the vast readership of *Vanguard*.

The personification encapsulated in the headline stands more as an exaggerated statement considering the meaning of the verb 'grip' in relation to 'the world' and therefore has the propensity to stir up anxiety. This article published on the same day with the front page news headline, *Ebola: panic spreads*, presented above creates the platform on which fears can be stirred and heightened considering the declarative stance of both sentences.

Furthermore, an overview of the other headlines of *Vanguard's* articles outlined in the table above alongside some other published news reports by other print mediaduring the EVD outbreak in Nigeria show a significant lack of depth which emphasises the growing anxieties and fears rather than proactive measures that can be taken to mitigate the spread of the viral disease. This further alludes to assertions that the Nigerian press on several occasions has contributed to the propagation of tensions and fears in the country (Ayodele 1988; Omenugha 2004). While some news reports were published with the intention to inform the consumers of such articles about breaking news stories and updates, headlines such as 'Ebola kills 56 in two days says WHO' has the propensity to inspire fears in communities where tensions are already inherent. The personification of 'Ebola' being the agent and subject which 'kills' 56 in just two days and the imagery it evokes coupled

with the number of deaths and EVD victims recorded in past outbreaks in affected west African countries create the tendency for fears to spread during the 2014 outbreak in Nigeria.

Although, the Nigerian mass media has been lauded for sufficient coverage of the EVD outbreak in the country (Nwanne 2014), the need to provide more interpretive and investigative news stories that provides in-depth information has been brought to the fore (Smith & Smith, 2016). The timely dissemination of these interpretive and investigative news reports that provide factual information which emphasises detailed ways in which an outbreak of viral disease can be mitigated has the propensity to lessen fears in affected communities and countries.

To disseminate detailed interpretive and investigative news reports, it becomes necessary for mass media organisations to effectively partner with other stakeholders such as local and international health organisations, hospitals and other health care officials, relevant government institutions among others. This speaks to the collaborative role of the media posited by Christians et al. (2009) which advocates a partnership between the mass media and centres of power in the society and specifically make reference to partnerships that advance mutually acceptable interests. During outbreak of viral diseases such as EVD, it becomes beneficial and necessary for the mainstream media to readily team up with other stakeholders if interpretive and investigative news reports will be timely disseminated.

The collaborative role enhances the dissemination of in-depth news reports that incorporates readily and accessible facts from medical and public health professionals alongside ways in which an outbreak of viral disease can be mitigated and therefore comes with the propensity to lessen rather than heighten the inherent fears that comes with most epidemic episodes. This role asserted as useful and necessary under unusual conditions of crisis, emergency, or threat by Christians et al. (2009:127) proffers an effective means to collaborate with other stakeholders and outbreak response teams and to consequently disseminate in-depth news reports that are investigative and interpretive as recommended by Smith & Smith (2016) and Uzuegbunam et al. (2016). In the eventuality of disease outbreaks such as Ebola, collaboration becomes mutually acceptable by all stakeholders who genuinely want to mitigate

the outbreak and consequently lessen anxieties and fears.

A general overview of the collaborations during the 2014 EVD outbreak as published by United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in conjunction with WHO and other humanitarian partners indicate the levels of mutual partnerships taken up while the outbreaks lasted. While the mass media was involved in the EVD response and mitigation efforts, it was not explicitly stated as primarily involved in the collaborations and partnerships that responded to the recorded EVD outbreaks. During epidemic episodes, interpretive and investigative coverage by the mainstream media cannot be achieved timeously without effective collaborations with other outbreak response teams. This therefore places an effective practice of the collaborative role that stem from a fully normative agreement between the mass media and other outbreak response teams as unavoidable during epidemic episodes if fears will rather be lessened than heightened.

Furthermore, the fears that accompany most outbreaks of viral diseases can be lessened if the mainstream media effectively takes up the monitorial and facilitative roles alongside the collaborative role. Effectively taking up these roles has to be a conscious and deliberate act by mass media professionals considering the inherent and growing concerns that comes with disease outbreaks.

Although, the monitorial role remains a normative journalistic attribute in most democratic societies (Christians et al.2009), this role must be consciously taken up during outbreaks and not taken for granted. This role speaks to the adequate and timely dissemination of news reports that includes warnings of potential risks, imminent dangers and threats that ranges from weather reports to wars and disorder (Christians et al. 2009: 145-146). While the print media in Nigeria, for instance, adequately took up the monitorial role during the EVD outbreak, an overview of the print media news reports show that the outbreak was not prominently and consistently featured prior to 20 July 2014 when the viral disease was first recorded in the country.

An overview of the news reports, features, opinion pieces and editorials published by *Vanguard* in July 2014 prior to the actual EVD outbreak shows that apart from the newsreport dated 14 July with the headline '*Lagos issues*

alert on Ebola, gives precautionary tips' which served as a proactive measure in educating the readership about EVD, other articles did not provide adequate information on EVD. Other news reports such as the insurgency by the radical Islamic sect (Boko Haram) in Nigeria, the school girls abducted by the sect, build up stories and analyses about the elections in some Nigerian states and the 2015 general elections were major stories and issues *Vanguard* was preoccupied with at the time. This speaks to Belo-Osagie's assertion that 0.1% of the newspapers were actually devoted to reporting EVD prior to when it was recorded in Nigeria (2015). This depicts a lack of proactive measure in disseminating facts and ways EVD could be avoided or mitigated prior to the actual outbreak.

The timely and continuous dissemination of accurate information about potential threats and outbreaks by mainstream media organisations highlights an important characteristic of the monitorial role, which as a normative role, contributes to creating a well-informed audience and readership ahead of outbreaks such as EVD. Additionally, effectively carrying out the monitorial role prior to, during and after an actual outbreak intersects with the agenda setting function of the mass media which asserts that no matter how minimal, the media has the propensity to create awareness, steer attention to issues, shape beliefs, actions and reactions. Effective dissemination of warnings about potential outbreaks and threats comes as an attempt to sway the attention of the readers, listeners and viewers while also creating a well-informed audience. This, as posited by Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan (2002) has the tendency to influence the salience of such issues disseminated by the mass media among the audience and consequently has the propensity to lessen fears in the eventuality of an outbreak of the already 'foretold' viral disease or infection.

An understanding of the facilitative role also provides insights that can be drawn on during outbreaks. This role is particularly useful in unpacking across cultural contexts the nuances that underlie public perception during an epidemic episode. The facilitative role as posited by Christians et al. (2009) speaks to the normative attribute where the mass media rather than maintaining an artificial consensus and uniform public opinion promote dialogue through effective communication among readers

and viewers whereby they engage and participate actively (2009, 158). During an epidemic episode, this role creates the needed platform for the public to raise their concerns and opinions while also providing mass media organisations with important feedback on their coverage of the outbreak.

Through vibrant negotiations void of political manipulations or supremacies, the facilitative role makes active engagements on pertinent issues possible (Christians et al., 2009). Through the mass media's facilitation of dialogues and deliberations, public perception and the underlining causes and reasons for fears during disease outbreaks can be better understood. This understanding of the perception of the public alongside the feedback on the coverage of an epidemic episode proffers the opportunity to disseminate useful and in-depth messages that consequently increases the propensity to mitigate fears.

Conclusion

This paper, drawing on the 2014 EVD outbreak in Nigeria and *Vanguard's* coverage of the outbreak alongside other available literature, provides additional perspective to mass media coverage of epidemics while highlighting fear as a major component in disease outbreaks. This paper proffers a conscious and effective use of the monitorial, facilitative and collaborative roles of the mass media as posited by Christians et al. (2009) as useful roles that has the propensity to lessen fears during disease outbreaks.

The more effectively these roles are taken up by journalists and other mass media professionals during outbreaks such as EVD, the higher the tendency to bring to the fore the salience of the issues surrounding the epidemic and 'set the agenda' in varying degrees amongst the audience of the information and messages disseminated by these mass media professionals. Taking up these roles entail the timely reporting and dissemination of adequate information before the outbreak of a viral disease, during the outbreak and after the outbreak has been successfully contained. Consequently, this has the propensity to lessen the fears that comes with outbreaks of viral diseases such as Ebola and other infectious and emerging diseases.

However, an important part of these efforts to lessen anxieties and fears lie in the conscious collaboration and partnership between the mass media, outbreak response teams and other

stakeholders. While the mass media must readily take up the initiative to collaborate with outbreak response teams and other stakeholders, these response teams, during epidemic episodes, must also incorporate the mass media as a primary stakeholder in outbreak and risk communications if the fears that characterise outbreaks of viral diseases must be lessened.

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