

Media System and the Coverage of COVID 19 Pandemic: Assessment of Emerging Issues

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic received enormous media coverage from the very beginning when it was first noticed in Wahan, China in December 2019. The media system which was hitherto defined by state political institutions and system witnessed a paradigm shift from the normative-critical approach to a rise of digital media that is analytical and characterized by a loose institutional framework. Consequently, a new media system heralded the COVID-19 era with robust communicative power that speaks to a majority of the global population. The paper used secondary data (document analysis) to descriptively analyzed issues that arose from the communicative power of the new media system coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues included emergence of a new media/medicine relations, the change in pattern of health news consumption and persistent public fear and panic. The paper recommended for a regulatory framework for telehealth service delivery, governments engagement of the public using social media platform and development of real-time alerts system for public health officials to respond quickly to misinformation during pandemics.

Keywords

COVID 19 pandemic, Media Systems, global politics

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Introduction

The news about the coronavirus disease (hereinafter referred to as COVID-19) got to the public domain through the media (both traditional and digital media). From December 2019 we witnessed widespread commentaries, sensational discussions and conspiracy theories across media system on the COVID-19 pandemic. The media system is the entire framework of institutions responsible for informing the public within a polity (state or region) with journalists directing the public information affairs (Hallin, 2016). The foregoing notion of media system is derived from Mancini's (2015) definition of media system as a subject of studies. The media system historically has always been influenced by state political and cultural structures (political, economic, and legal). Early research on media system was mainly comparative studies designed to show connection between media within states and regions, and how the political systems impact on them. This was the central theme addressed in Siebert et al (1963) when they developed models of media systems (authoritarian, liberal, social-responsible, and soviet-communist systems) that existed during the Cold War era.

However, the emergence of digital media, media system seems to be gradually losing its close knitted institutional framework. Chadwick (2017),

described the emerging situation succinctly; "political communication is journeying through a chaotic transition period induced by the rise of digital media". The dynamic expansion of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) based on internet connections, digital technologies, miniaturized 'intelligence' devices, especially smartphones and tablets have given the rather passive media audience (readers, watchers and listeners) many different opportunities and options to create and even publish journalistic contents (Višňovský et al, 2018). This communicative power has become a powerful tool for people's struggles, from Ukraine's Orange Revolution" to "Occupy Wall Street" in New York (Doual, 2013), and most recent the #endsars peaceful demonstrations in Nigeria at the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic era witnessed a loose media system as it fed the public with multiple stories and headlines. How the emergent media systems impacted on the COVID-19 pandemic is the focus of this paper. The assumption of this paper is that a new media system spearheaded by digital media has emerged and taking the lead in restructuring global politics by making global communication rights a practicable policy. This paper examined the multiple narratives by media system as a result of rapid diffusion of new communication technologies during the COVID-

19 and its impact on shaping the political communication environment in global politics. This paper which is mainly document analysis of media theories is divided into 6 sections. The second section after the introduction covered the literature review and theoretical framework while the third section is the overview of global media system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth section examined the issues arising from the emergent of a new global media system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fifth section examined the implications of a new media systems on global politics while the sixth section is the conclusion and policy recommendations. The paper is not specific to any particular environment as it relates to the global community as one unified body.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

i. Review of Literature

Media system definition according to Steele (2012) depend on time and context. This postulation is based on the historical evolution of the media and how technologies and political systems have continued to influence the media. The media system is therefore set of media institutions and practices designed to provide information and communication that interact with and shape one another within the state (Seethaler, 2017). Literature on media system has a long tradition strongly influenced by the Cold War which traditionally consisted of print, film, radio, and TV (Bernhard, 1999). During this period, the media system operated within the confines of a state or region and set agenda by reporting the news and providing entertainment. It served as the mouthpiece of the state or region (Doherty, 2003) through journalistic activities. This is why Rohrhofer (2014) posited that the media system is strongly embedded in their social, economic, and political environment. By this postulation, Rohrhofer perceived the media system within specific geographical space. This explained why early works on media system were mainly comparative studies that highlighted state and regional similarities of media despite their different politics.

The COVID-19 is the first pandemic to occur in the digital communications era, setting the stage for a number of emerging issues that interrogates our traditional framework of media system

(Olatunji et al, 2020). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has generated a rapid spread of all kinds of information leading to massive infodemic. It has revolutionized the concept of global communication rights by reviving passive audience that have never shown interest in public policies during the earlier media system era. The media system generally by its tradition, is supposed to present and determine what is and is not worth presenting, or reporting as news (democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian political systems). In the United States (US) where free press is deeply entrenched, social responsibility framework guided media system operations. In China, Russia and Iran, they maintained state-sponsored media system (Chernaskey, 2020). The point being made is that a particular polity was always behind the operational structures of media system. However, the entire structure of the media system across states and regions were challenged during the COVID-19 period with the emergence of digital media.

Romm (2020) noted that the new media has made it difficult to control what gets to the public domain in terms of facts due to the peculiar features associated with it (manipulate, converge, and instant). The manipulate feature refers to ability to tamper with the contents of new media. Converge refers to ability to transmit and switch over different network using Internet Protocols (IP) while instant represents the speed of the new media (Steele, 2012). These features give the new media ability to disseminate a lot of unverified information that creates anxiety and uncertainty among the populace. These are the features that played out during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Though media framing on COVID-19 shaped the discourse on the Covid-19 across the globe but it could not match the fake news that was peddled through the new media. We observed increased media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic which highlighted conspiracy theories and sensational news such as geopolitical rivalry among the great powers (United States and China). This in turn further undermined efforts for a unified response to prevent the spread (Stromseth, 2020). This brings to the fore, the critical importance of knowledge and information in addressing pandemics. How the world can

ensure that the public is properly informed during pandemics yearn for some theoretical explanation.

ii. Theoretical Framework

The precept that the media system serves the public for the common good informed the decision to adopt the social responsibility framework for understanding media system and the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social responsibility theory defined guidelines that the media should follow in order to fulfill its obligation of serving the public. It claimed that the media could be self-regulating by adhering to various precepts which include: media obligations to democratic society; media self-regulation; media professionalism and objectivity, as well as truth and accuracy (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). The social responsibility does not only fall upon the reporters and producers of media. The responsibility also falls to the consumers to become media literate and maintain high, yet reasonable expectations of the media. In theory, if these things happen, there will be no need for government intervention in terms of regulating the media and its participation in spreading rumors and propaganda to the public.

Foss (2020), in agreement with the social responsibility precepts argued that when a pandemic strike, media systems helps in framing the required information from doctors, and politicians and how the public understand the pandemic. News narratives serve as historical records, capturing sentiments, responses, and fears throughout the course of the pandemic. It is for the foregoing reasons that Shuchman and Wilkes (1997) advocated for self-regulation within the new media. The question that emerges is how do you regulate the individual user behavior to conform with the social responsibility precepts without infringing of individual freedom of expression. Fagan (2018) in his work on social media regulation suggested “a systematic approach to social media regulation. This implies adjusting the architecture of the social media platform including algorithmic newsfeeds. The systemic approach also includes funneling questionable content creators to areas of the platform where they may have less impact. The

criticism to this suggestion is whether it would not amount to suppression which is a fundamental human right concern. This idea on where to place the social media within the media social responsibility framework will certainly continue to attract commentaries. However, what is crucial to this paper is that the media system must be socially responsible to the public especially during pandemics.

Overview of Global Media Systems and Coverage of COVID-19 Pandemic

The 1918 influenza and 2009 influenza virus are two important historical cases of pandemics in human history with no vaccine and antibiotics at its inception. Records showed that non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as isolation, quarantine, good personal hygiene, use of disinfectants, and limitations of public gatherings were the protocols introduced to curb the spread (CDC website, 2020). In keeping to these NPIs, governments relied on the media system to disseminate the required information to the public (Honigsbaum, 2013). Like previous pandemics, the discovery of COVID-19 in Wuhan China created a human security concern which prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Again, with no vaccine and antibiotics insight, the WHO began to advocate NPIs using media system heralding media and medical relationship in communicating the protocols for flattening the pandemic curve.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered a new era of media and medical relations now referred to as telemedicine. According to the report of the American Medical Association (AMA), the media coverage helped to promote patience acceptance of telemedicine (Senz, 2020). Telemedicine is the delivery of clinical services using telecommunications technology, including video conferencing and telephone calls (Reaburn, 1998). It helped to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Smith, 2019). Research revealed that at the early stage of COVID-19, many patients did not trust this new form of health service delivery but persistent media systems advocacy helped to change the narrative and the current indicators revealed that telehealth services have come to stay. Many doctors were able to spread the latest knowledge about the COVID-19 through media

system. Articles published by international authoritative magazines in the form of popular science, and conduct free medical consultation were made available on social media (Li, 2020). However, there are concerns over privacy and data safety. Blandford (2020) noted that telehealth comes with risks including exacerbating the digital divide, poor software engineering, and security breaches.

Media system released tons of narratives and messages on COVID-19 pandemic to the general public. Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the UN aptly described the emergent situation when he tweeted that “our common enemy is COVID-19, but our enemy is also ‘infodemic’ of misinformation” (UN COVID-19 Response, 2020). The WHO defined an *Infodemic* as “an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—occurring during an epidemic, making it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when it is most needed” (WHO Conference, 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, there has been a tsunami of information on media system prompting the BBC to report that “the human cost of the misinformation undermined the public health messaging”. The BBC team tracking coronavirus misinformation found links to assaults, arsons and deaths (BBC, 2020). The media system helped to highlight the conspiracy theories that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The narratives that Bill Gates orchestrated the outbreak as part of an obscure plan to control the world, the 5G exposure through cell phone technology causing the infection, and the QAnon myth about a cabal and Satan-worshippers, among others were all circulated through new media. The new media messaging led to mob attacks in India (Shaikh, 2020) and mass poisonings in Iran and telecommunications engineers being attacked in the United Kingdom (UK)—all because of conspiracy theories.

Issues arising from global media systems and coverage of COVID-19 pandemic

There are a number of issues arising from media systems and coverage of COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, three critical issues central to this paper are emergence of a new media/medicine relations, the change in pattern of health news

consumption and persistent public fear and panic are discussed subsequently.

- i. ***Emergence of a new media/medicine relations.*** In the most part of success story recorded during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the new media was very central. A new relation between media and medicine has emerged, now referred to as telehealth delivery system. It is a system of delivering caring using media tools while keeping public health officials safe. Though is still evolving across the world but is it a new reality for the future. The concerns about this form of health care system include privacy of patient and data safety.
- ii. ***Changing Pattern in News Consumption.*** News consumption is a crucial process to promote an informed citizenry committed to public affairs. The traditional media (television, newspapers) are losing their pre-eminence as the main source of information for citizens on public affairs. It became more pronounced during the pandemic period as more people turned to the new media (social media for information and knowledge about COVID-19). The social media have generated unprecedented scale and speed in the dissemination of fake news. There is now a proliferation of channels and platforms and multiplication of information providers with different agenda from the media systems social responsibility foundation. Scholars linked the rise in the use of social media to public distrust in the traditional media which they feel is tied to the political institutions that have failed them. This explained the growth of social media that is used to propagate populism across the world.
- iii. ***Global Fear and panic.*** When the outbreak started, the public was keen to find appropriate resources and information for their own protective needs and the media systems was the most available channel. However, misinformation, and misleading news about COVID-19 was quick to raid the media systems globally causing the WHO to express concerns over the role of the media systems in spreading fear, anxiety and anger. For instance, misinformation on Facebook about possible medications, including

hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19, inspired many people to buy such medicines without medical approval, resulting in the inadequacy of these medications for patients who required them. Research has shown that a lack of clear communication can lead to confusion and even panic among people. Media systems coverage of the unfolding events fueled baseless panic among many people that created confusion and hampered mental wellbeing of citizens. Since misinformation is spreading continuously on social media sites, awareness and appropriate preventive measures are of utter importance for public safety.

Addressing the Issues arising from media systems and coverage of COVID-19 Pandemic

A former United Nations (UN) Secretary General Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali described the television news station Cable News network (CNN) as the sixteenth member of the UN Security Country (Badsey, 2000) suggesting that CNN as at then was a very powerful tool with information power. Similar attributes could be assigned to the new media in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. Social media has taken the place of traditional media as it plays a large and growing role in shaping public opinion. The difference between the CNN then and the new media is on regulation. The new media is not properly regulated all over the world and this poses serious security concerns. The world has to accept the new media as part of modern realities but not the flaws associated with the new media. In order to get the best out of the new media, there is need to address some of the issues arising from media system and coverage of COVID-19 through the following ways:

- i. Establishment of an interactive platform that is secured for telehealth service delivery. It is imperative that governments across the world initiate regulatory processes for this form of healthcare delivery system and ensure that the media platforms for its delivery are secured.
- ii. Governments across the world need to take advantage of the social media tools to encourage public engagement in the political processes, such as debates on public policy, increase transparency and facilitate transparent decision-making. This will help to rebuild public confidence in the political

institutions, and reduce the incidence of populism that has characterized the COVID-19 period across the world.

- iii. A successful public health intervention during pandemics need a credible media platform to provide reliable inform to the public. This implies that the WHO need to provide real-time alerts of globally spreading misinformation and rumors about the coronavirus so that public health officials and relevant stakeholders can respond quickly with an engaging and proactive narrative that can resolve the false information. This would reduce the global panic and fear arising from media systems coverage of COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

The current realities have showed that the new media has radically changed the structure, operations, dimensions and capabilities of media systems. The old media structure was operated within the confines of state agenda. In the current reality, the communicative power has been handed over to the public. They now set the agenda for public discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic brought these distinct features of the media system to the fore. It revealed how closely societies are interwoven with one another with the new media interconnectivity. It also highlighted that the international community was only as strong as its weakest given that the communicative power was in the hands of the public. The new media role during pandemic necessitated the need to redefine the media system and restructure the institutions that regulate the media system. Many of the information and knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic were spread to the public through the new media. The use of telehealth services during the pandemic ushered a new era of media and medical relations. However, there were concerns over privacy of patient and data safety and integrity. The role the media in the COVID-19 pandemic era suggests that there is a great future for media and medicine which imply that cost of medical treatment may drop drastically.

The tsunamic of information from media system that was made available to the public became a serious challenge to public health messaging necessitating the need for proper coordination of media information during pandemics. The

COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that telehealth will be part of our new realities in the future. However, it is not clear whether state health institutions are bracing up to accommodate the imminent challenges that will be associated with this new reality. The media system amplification of the discourse on COVID-19 caused fears and panic across the world. In many instances, statistics were provided out of context and the public used them to make critical decisions. The diffusion of conspiracy theories related to the origin of COVID-19 on social media challenged the social responsibility foundation of media system. Effective communication between the public and the public health authorities through the media platforms are among the essential components of successful pandemic responses. This has consequently compelled the need to initiate systemic regulation of social media in conformity with the social responsibility precepts while not compromising human rights. In view of the foregoing, the following are recommended:

- a. There is the urgent need to evolve a regulatory framework to guide telehealth service delivery.
- b. Governments across the world should take advantage of the social media tools to encourage public engagement and strategic communication during pandemics.
- c. The WHO should provide real-time alerts system for public health officials and relevant stakeholders to respond quickly to misinformation during pandemics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Yusuf Abubakar Mamud's academic and field research specialization is in Conflict Studies, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), De-radicalization, Counterterrorism and underpinning Social Mobilization theory in interpreting and understanding the concepts of Islamism and violent extremism instigated by misinterpretation of Islam. One of Yusuf's major contributions to conflict studies is in the collation and compilation of the book titled "A Comprehensive Review of African Conflicts and Regional Interventions (CRACRI)", edited by Festis B. Aboagye, a project commissioned by the African Union Commission and supported by the African Peace

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