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Global media advocacy function in diffusing controversial COVID-19 vaccination

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Abstract

COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy poses additional challenge to the global economy other than governments' investments in providing vaccines to contain spread and to eradicate the pandemic. Rather than leading advocacy to drive the exercise, the global media appear to direct efforts at covering the controversies surrounding COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. This paper evaluated the role of global media advocacy function in countering COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy. The qualitative paper combined Media Functionalism and Social Cognitive theories as theoretical cornerstone. As critical stakeholders in public affairs management, the paper highlighted the imperativeness of media advocacy function in stimulating mass COVID-19 vaccination. It recommended, among other things, that the global media (print and broadcast) should demonstrate commitment to encouraging mass COVID-19 vaccination by sustaining campaigns that are aimed at eradicating hesitancy. The paper also recommended that relevant governmental authorities should collaborate with the mass media to refute the gamut of misinformation and misconception of COVID-19 vaccination.

Keywords: COVID-19 vaccination, COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy, global media, mass COVID-19 vaccination, media advocacy function

Introduction

COVID-19 vaccination has continued to pose additional challenge other than the task of containing spread of the pandemic in countries hit by the disease. In Europe and America, for instance, the vaccination exercise has been controversial, resulting in protests in some provinces and leaving governmental authorities with the temptation of enforcing compulsory vaccination. The dilemma of enforcing compulsory vaccination not only stems from subsisting local and international conventions that protect people's rights but also due to the fact that the gamut of conflicting testimonies about side effects of the vaccines have not been convincingly vacated by relevant government institutions and international health bodies, especially the *World Health Organisation* (WHO).

Other than fear of probable negative effects of COVID-19 vaccines and conflicting testimonies by some vaccinated people, debates around the source of the pandemic still lives in the memory of citizens of the global community. This is especially when the debate revolves around world powers, particularly United States of America and People's Republic of China. At several fora, the immediate past American president, Donald Trump had accused the Chinese government of possible involvement or being behind the creation of COVID-19 pandemic (Mangan, 2020). Thus, Mr. Trump described the pandemic as "Chinese virus". The brazen debate about alleged source of the pandemic and the fact that such accusations have not been convincingly vacated is sufficient hurdle to wide acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines or vaccination in relation to the disease whose origin still lives in the realm of suspicion.

The COVID-19 vaccination situation is not different in Africa. There are wide protests against compulsory vaccination in South Africa (Mlaba, 2021; Givetash, 2022) ^[19, 10]. Compulsory COVID-19 vaccination-related protests have left the South African authorities with close consideration of laws that protect people's rights. Although, the Federal Government of Nigeria is yet to reach a conclusion on compulsory vaccination, there are apprehensions and agitations against such a directive in Nigeria.

Agitations against compulsory COVID-19 vaccination in Nigeria were heightened following the statement of the Executive Director of *National Primary Healthcare Development Agency*, Dr. Faisal Shuaib in a press briefing in Abuja that the Federal Government of Nigeria

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might sanction eligible Nigerians who refuse COVID-19 vaccination when the vaccines have been made sufficiently available. Dr. Shuaib disclosed that the Federal Government might apply the basic rule of law to drive compulsory COVID-19 vaccination in Nigeria (Ojerinde, Tolu-Kolawole, Naku, Adedipe and Nejo, 2021; Muanya, Onyedika-Ugoeze, Egbejule and Nwaoku, 2021) [24, 20].

Of particular note in COVID-19 vaccination situation in Nigeria is that hesitancy and compulsory vaccination controversies have recorded the first litigation in Edo State, where some civil society organisations in the State had challenged Edo State government's threat to restrict unvaccinated citizens from public places from second week of September, 2021. On August 31, 2021, a Port Harcourt high court, ruling on the controversial compulsory COVID-19 vaccination in Edo State, restrained the State Government from enforcing the plan (Agency Reporter, 2021; Enogholase and Aliu, 2021; Olabimtan, 2021) [2, 8].

Although, the source and side effects of COVID-19 vaccines may not be very convincing, what is clear to the global community is that the pandemic has continually plagued humanity with rising fatalities across the globe. This is rather the reality that requires coordinated advocacy efforts to engender mass vaccination, especially to contain the rampaging *variants* of the pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding citizen's hesitancy to COVID-19 vaccination and the invocation of laws and conventions against compulsory vaccination, the pandemic has continued to ravage nations of the world. At the end of August, 2021, Nigeria, for instance, recorded over two hundred thousand confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over two thousand fatalities (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2021). The rising cases of the pandemic in Nigeria, especially due to the *Delta Variant*, constitutes a threat on the nation's economy. That both human and material capitals are continuously lost to COVID-19 makes any effort directed at eradicating the pandemic, including vaccination, most critical as long as the vaccines are safe and efficacious.

Other than mere coverage of COVID-19 pandemic and related events, the role of the global media in eliminating citizens' hesitancy to vaccination is rather unclear. Even public media stations substantially appear evasive amidst citizen hesitancy to COVID-19 vaccination. Equivocality to COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy negates media interpretative functions, especially through formats, such as, editorials, features and opinion articles (for print media) and interviews, talk-shows and voxpop (for broadcast media). It also appears that governmental agencies around the globe were yet to fully realise the role of media advocacy in diffusing COVID-19 vaccination instead of forceful implementation of the policy. (BRING IN ANY WORK HERE TO BUTTRESS THIS POINT) Thus, this paper is justified by the crucial role of global media advocacy in orchestrating mass COVID-19 vaccination.

Operational Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined as they pertained to this paper and not their lexical meanings.

COVID-19 Vaccination: This involves the ongoing vaccination of eligible citizens in order to eradicate COVID-19 pandemic. The first phase of COVID-19 vaccination in Nigeria began in March, 2021 with the introduction of

AstraZeneca vaccines. The second phase of vaccination began in Nigeria in August, 2021 with the arrival of *Johnson and Johnson* and *Moderna* vaccines.

COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy: This is the refusal of COVID-19 vaccines by eligible citizens. COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy is based on people's suspicion about the side effects of the vaccines. COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy is heightened by conflicting testimonies by the vaccinated.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Media Functionalism Theory

The Functionalism theory, otherwise referred to as the media functional theory, was propounded by Harold Lasswell and Charles Wright in 1948 (McQuail, 2010) [14]. This theory conceives the society as a social system composed of interdependent parts which function together to engender stability and social order (Miller, 2006) [18]. These independent parts, described as sub-systems, include institutions, such as, the family, human communities, religion, politics and mass media. These individual sub-systems function to respond to the needs of the ongoing social structure with connected sub-structures which function and contribute to the well-being of the social structure. McQuail (2010) [14] argues that the importance of the mass media to the well-being of the society is the fact that decorum or social stability requires continuous "maintenance of a more or less accurate, consistent, supportive and complete picture of the working of the society and of the social environment" (p. 98).

The place of the mass media in the creation a working society is not only due to the manifest functions of the mass media to the society, such as, information dissemination, education and entertainment but also because the media are a potent force in the construction and displacement of social reality (Dominick, 2009; DeFleur, 2010; McQuail, 2010) [6, 7, 14]. The media popularise social reality, just as they accord meanings to people and phenomena. The mass media wield the force for social mobilisation. This force is not only due to the pervasive nature of the media but also due to their ability to influence and lead opinion on social issues (Miller, 2002) [17].

McQuail (2010) [14], summarising the role of the mass media in management of the society, states that the:

- a. media are an institution of society;
- b. they perform the necessary task of order, control and cohesion;
- c. they are also necessary for adaptation and change;
- d. functions are recognisable in the effect of the media;
- e. management of tension;
- f. there are also unintended harmful effects which can be classified as dysfunctions (p.100).

The role of the media in achieving social well-being vests journalists and media organisations with the responsibility to lead advocacy for mass COVID-19 vaccination. The task of vacating supposed false reality built around COVID-19 vaccines and vaccination requires advocacy communication. Advocacy communication also beckons on governmental authorities to forestall the crisis that may result from forceful COVID-19 vaccination implementation.

Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive theory was propounded by Albert

Bandura during the 1960's (DeFleur, 2010) [6]. The theory is concerned with the factors that underlie human behaviour in relation to the acceptance and adoption of a new idea. That is, the adoption of new forms of behaviour does not occur in isolation, but it is a consequence of certain interacting factors which exert influences on humans. This is opposed to the notion that individuals could perform new activities possibly by chance.

According to Bandura (1989) [4], the social cognitive theory describes a dynamic (on-going) process in which a number of factors interact and influence each other, thereby provoking the individual to undertake an action or inaction. Such factors include: personal (instincts, drive, traits and other motivational forces); environmental (events, happenings, hazards and changes); and social (cultural orientations). These factors interact and affect how individuals perceive social phenomena. Thus, DeFleur (2010) [6] describes the social cognitive philosophy as an important key to understand how people acquire new ways to respond to their environment. It goes to say that people's actions are often governed by reason, including apprehensions. These reasons form the basis upon which individuals adopt or disregard new ideas. Lerner (1982) argues that people are neither simply driven by inner forces nor are their actions shaped by the environment. Instead, these factors interact with each other and exert some influence on the individual which results in the motivation to participate in a social cause or otherwise (Bandura, 1989) [4].

The problem with development messages, such as COVID-19 vaccination, is not just in the dissemination of the message but the effort it requires to stimulate motivation, which stimulates the senses of urgency to behave as required. According to Lin, Bragley and Koops (2003), the dissemination of messages targeted at changing people's attitude does not only consist in the presentation of the message through a medium but also "presenting compelling arguments that convey a sense of urgency for action while making the proposed action irresistible" (p.12). What makes a message irresistible is the sense of urgency it conveys. However, this sense of urgency which results in the adoption of new ideas does not come in isolation. It is a function of people's understanding of the damage or other consequences which could unavoidably result due to negligence. This is the step that beckons to stimulate mass COVID-19 vaccination globally. It is to demonstrate the implications of vaccination and hesitancy through knowledge sharing, rather than the application of force which may continue to warrant resistances.

Defining Advocacy Communication

Advocacy is one of the strategies through which development agents lead the direction of thought or opinion of members of a target audience towards a social action. It is concerned with drawing support for a programme. According to Asadu (2009) [3], advocacy communication involves the process of disseminating policy-related information through the communication media, interpersonal approaches, traditional media and other media forms especially where the aim is to effect a change, to drive policy or to alter public perception of a phenomenon. What this means is that advocacy involves strategies that are used to market an idea or programme in order to obtain intended results.

Advocacy does not seek to beguile people. It dwells on persuasive presentation of issues to a concerned public and seeking citizens' support based on benefits that would emanate from the adoption of the idea being marketed. Thus, Asadu (2009) [3], quoting Servaes (1993), describes advocacy communication as:

...a contribution of social action designed to gain political commitment, policy supports, social acceptance and system support for a particular goal or programme. It involves collecting and structuring information into a persuasive case; communicating the case to policy-makers and potential supporters including the public, through various interpersonal and media channels; stimulating action by social institutions, stakeholders and policy makers in support of the goal or programme (p.70).

The understanding that advocacy communication dwells on making clear recommendations to members of a group (public) regarding a social action presupposes the recognition of the place of congruence and acceptability of the idea being advanced. This would necessarily serve as the condition for acceptance, adoption and action.

It is true that advocacy communication should convey a sense of urgency in the target audience, the sense of urgency which the message conveys does not in any case imply compulsion, even if negligence could produce negative consequence for the audience. The advocacy approach is keen, unambiguous and persuasive. It presents the target audience with an opportunity to evaluate the idea being advanced in order unmask the truth concealed in frivolous claims. Thus, advocacy pursues not only the acceptance of immediate idea, but also the sustenance of mutual trust secured at the entry phase. This is indisputable since social relationships thrive on trust.

Advocacy and Media Social Responsibility Function

The Social Responsibility media philosophy evolved through the report of the Hutchin's Commission set up in 1942 to respond to alleged widespread sensational, commercial and monopolistic approach of the libertarian press era. The Commission was saddled with the responsibility to critically examine areas and circumstances under which the press was succeeding or failing ((McQuail, 2010) [14]. The libertarian era afforded the press considerable freedom from undue government control. The result of this free marketplace of operation was yellow journalism, characterised by character assassination and sensationalism (Nwachukwu, Asak and Asadu, 2012) [21]. It was the abuses associated with libertarianism that necessitated the establishment of the Hutchin's Commission to work out a more responsible press philosophy to meet the needs of the society.

The underlying premise of the social responsibility theory is that freedom is worthless except it is exercised to serve the community (McQuail, 2010) [14]. What this means is that apart from the establishment or legislation of laws to regulate media operations, the mass media, just as individuals, owe society the responsibility to carry out their activities responsibly. The media should accommodate all shades of opinion and not only that of the privileged few. The media should give voice to the voiceless.

McQuail (2010) [14] summarises the central ideologies of media social responsibility function as:

1. the media have obligation to society and media ownership is a public trust;

2. news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant;
3. the media should be free, but self-regulated;
4. the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct;
5. under some circumstance, government may need to intervene to safeguard public interest (p. 171).

The foregoing submission by McQuail (2010) ^[14] underscores the argument that community service is the hallmark of media operation. That is, the media should provide support to public governance structures towards achieving a progressive society. During national or global emergencies, the press, as a critical stakeholder in the pursuance of public good, owes a responsibility not only to inform but also to support the government and other authorities in safeguarding the society and its people through proper interpretation of issues, especially controversial matters. Media interpretation can be offered through feature stories, editorials, interviews and opinions (for the print media) and talk-shows, interviews, commentaries and voxpops (for the broadcast media).

Advocacy Communication and the Diffusion of Controversial COVID-19 Vaccination

The postulation of Diffusion of Innovations paradigm is credited to Everett Rogers, in his book "Diffusion of innovations" in 1962 (Baran and Davis, 2009) ^[5]. Diffusion of innovations interrogates the processes by which an idea (innovation) diffuses and spreads through a target population over time in order to gain acceptance. According to George (2006), different kinds of people embrace and adopt new ideas in different ways and at different times. This presents a fact that not everybody adopts new ideas the same way and time. Okorie and Ekwamu (2012) ^[25] argue that to possibly communicate solutions to problems plaguing a community, awareness of people's perception and attitude towards such a phenomenon should be certified in order to ensure realisation of intended benefits.

The foregoing argument presents the fact that the introduction of COVID-19 vaccination to contain spread of the pandemic may not after all translate into its adoption and use by members of the global population. It is possible that certain intervening variables could whittle the vaccination project, thereby making its adoption challenging. Roling, Ascroft and Chege (1976), cited in Nwanmereni and Ochonogor (2020), argue that:

Diffusion is usually seen as a god-sent autonomous process which assures the trickle-down of income and welfare-generating ideas and which thereby guarantees their distribution among members of a population. Until the 1970s, there was some evidence of this expectation that diffusion process could distribute the benefits of new technology, breaking economic growth...However, instead of traditional tribesmen and isolated villagers as the main audience for diffusion programs, we have masses...whose lack of opportunities, rather than their resistance to change, seems to be the major bottleneck to development (p.64).

What this means is that the introduction of an intervention to solve a general problem requires immediate and continuous acceptance of such intervention by the target population. This is following the fact that the incorporation of such a new idea may not simply translate into the adoption and acceptance by the target population. To this

end, the understanding of the tendency of members of a target population to behave in varying ways should constrain constant evaluation of the degree of changes a particular innovation has accomplished in the target population or group. The diffusion paradigm beckons on global health authorities and the mass media to orchestrate mass acceptance of COVID-19 vaccination and to eliminate apprehensions of the laggards.

Necessity of Refuting COVID-19 Vaccination Misinformation

COVID-19 vaccination around the world has been trailed by the frightening accounts of the side effects of the vaccines, particularly negative side effects. Cases abound where people were said to have experienced mild and moderate symptoms, such as, fever, headache and muscle pains after vaccination. There are also reports of acute side effects of COVID-19 vaccines, such as, brain disorder and blood clotting. The possibility of manifesting some of these symptoms have been acknowledged by health authorities and pharmaceutical companies. Even the World Health Organisation (WHO) has acknowledged that COVID-19 vaccines could produce varying degrees of changes in vaccinated people. World Health Organisation (2021) ^[33] also acknowledges that results of clinical trials of COVID-19 vaccines showed that more serious and long-lasting side effects are possible.

The acknowledgement of the side effects of COVID-19 vaccines by the World Health Organisation and the testimonies of many vaccinated people have thrown citizens of the world into panic. The result is the growing hesitancy to COVID-19 vaccination witnessed around the world, despite the ravaging *Delta Variant* and deaths arising from the pandemic. For instance, a survey conducted by Loomba, de Fogueiredo and Heidi (2021) reveals that in both United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA), fewer people would definitely take COVID-19 vaccines. The study found out that estimates of COVID-19 vaccines acceptance in UK in June 2021 was 38% and 34% in USA. What this means is that despite the devastation caused by COVID-19 pandemic in UK and USA, many citizens of the nations were hesitant to vaccination due to fear of side effects of the vaccines.

In May 2021, the *National Primary Health Care Development Agency* (NPHCDA) admitted recording side effects of COVID-19 vaccination in Nigeria. In a press briefing, Executive Director of the Agency, Dr. Faisal Shuaib admitted that more than ten thousand of less than two million vaccinated citizens of Nigeria reported various symptoms and degrees of side effects after receiving the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine (Adebowale, 2021) ^[1]. As in other climes, the admission of COVID-19 side effects by NPHCDA has thrown eligible COVID-19 vaccination intents in Nigeria into hesitancy due to fear of the unknown. This is in addition to the alleged connection of COVID-19 vaccination with acceptance of the biblical "mark of the beast". Also, the *National Agency for Foods and Drugs Administration and Control* (NAFDAC) has acknowledged the circulation of fake AstraZeneca vaccines in Nigeria (Olorok, 2021; Olorok and Adepegha, 2021) ^[27, 28, 29]. To this end, despite government's threats of compulsory vaccination, many eligible Nigerian citizens have strong hesitancy to COVID-19 vaccination. Also, the deluge of frightening reports on social media about the side effects of

COVID-19 vaccines has further compounded hesitancy among many people.

More so, reports of deaths arising from COVID-19 vaccination have had substantial contribution of people's hesitancy to the exercise. Alleged side effects of vaccines led to the suspension of vaccination in some European countries, such as, Spain, Germany, France, Italy and Holland (Olorok, Baiyewu and Ojerinde, 2021) ^[27, 28, 29]. More so, in August 2021, the government of New Zealand announced the death of a woman after she received the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines. The country's Health Ministry reported that the woman suffered a rare heart muscle inflammation side effect (Menon, 2021) ^[15].

Ideally, information management about COVID-19 vaccination should not simply dwell on the narratives of side effects but also the reassurance of the safety of vaccines. This is especially since majority of vaccinated people did not experience any side effects. It goes to say that there is need for pragmatically-coordinated advocacy networks by relevant stakeholders to allay people's apprehensions of COVID-19 vaccine side effects. It also means that compulsory enforcement of COVID-19 vaccination with or without prejudice to citizens' rights may not result in mass acceptance of vaccination. Solis, Warren and Meriggi (2021) ^[30] state that there is need to deliver messages highlighting COVID-19 efficacy and safety against the deluge of messages which only emphasise vaccine adverse reactions. The scholars identify the importance of establishing advocacy communication networks to counter the hype of COVID-19 vaccine side effects as opposed to investments in vaccines production and the eradication of the rampaging pandemic. Advocacy is crucial in countering COVID-19 misinformation especially since hesitancy is attitudinal. Advocacy is also superior to forceful vaccination that may encounter resistances and result in avoidable social upheavals as currently witnessed around the world.

Concluding Remarks

The paradoxical COVID-19 hesitancy amid the devastations caused by the pandemic constitutes an additional burden to the global economy. The burden is to correct the imbalance in the flow of COVID-19 vaccination information, which only emphasises adverse reactions instead of the safety and efficacy of the vaccines. The hype of the side effects against the usefulness of certified vaccines is a setback in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

Since hesitancy to COVID-19 vaccination derives from apprehensions arising from the misinformation about side effects of vaccines, it is only natural to initiate advocacy communication actions that should correct the misrepresentation. It is important to vacate the cloud of apprehensions built around COVID-19 vaccines in order to raise the confidence of eligible citizens to present themselves for vaccination. There is need to match or even to overrun the myths around COVID-19 vaccination with accurate information by reassuring eligible citizens of the safety and efficacy of vaccines. Citizens should also be assured that possible side effects are normal and not harmful.

As in regular social actions, global COVID-19 mass vaccination requires the collaboration of relevant stakeholders – the government, health authorities, civil society groups, the mass media, non-governmental health

agencies and opinion leaders and the establishment of interpersonal networks to enable the facilitators to elicit feedbacks. This exemplifies the observation of UNESCO (1980) ^[32] that if overall communication power is to be exploited to promote a social action, efforts must be made to structure the links between communication media and institutional actors and to provide the mechanism for feedback from constituents (Udoudo and Nwanmereni, 2016) ^[31]. The establishment of a feedback mechanism is crucial to constantly elicit and respond to citizens' dispositions to COVID-19 vaccination. This interpersonal advocacy paradigm is precautionary instead of leaving eligible citizens' response to COVID-19 vaccination to chance. Global media advocacy function is also precautionary to forestall uncertainties that may arise from forceful COVID-19 vaccination.

Recommendations

1. The global media (print and broadcast) should demonstrate commitment to encouraging mass COVID-19 vaccination by sustaining campaigns that are aimed at eradicating hesitancy. Media interpretative formats, such as, editorials, features and opinions (for print media) and interviews, talk-shows, commentaries and voxpop (for broadcast media) should be exploited to provide more accurate information about the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines.
2. Relevant health authorities should collaborate with the global media to refute the gamut of misinformation about COVID-19 vaccination. It is important to reassure eligible citizens that the vaccines are safe and that side effects are normal.
3. Relevant health authorities should educate COVID-19 vaccination intents on how to manage or to report vaccine side effects. This is to ensure that appropriate expert advice is followed when side effects are observed.
4. In view of agitations against compulsory vaccination moves, government of affected countries should consider dialogue to encourage mass vaccination. Rather than the invocation of powers that may trigger protests, sometimes hijacked by criminals, it is precautionary to negotiate the importance of eradicating the pandemic with COVID-19 vaccination unbelievers.

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