

Editorial

Why does misinformation about COVID-19 thrive on social media platforms? Suggesting an intervention strategy for Nigerian government

The international community is currently battling to save lives and livelihood as a result of the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Statistics from the World Health Organization (2020) point to the fact that as at October 12, 2020, 37,423,660 cases of the virus have been confirmed globally with 1,074,817 fatalities. People have lost their jobs, while the earning abilities of families and individuals have been severely threatened. COVID-19 has brought the world to its knees, grounding economic activities and compelling people to take desperate measures (Gever & Ezeah, 2020).

One of the things that have made the virus more dangerous is the lack of neither a vaccine nor a definite cure for it (Sun *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2020). WHO says that prevention is the best option that the world has to effectively contain the spread of the virus. Information sharing has equally been identified as key to combating the spread of the virus. According to WHO, when people have access to accurate and timely information about COVID-19, it will play a crucial role in determining the success level in the fight against the virus and vice-versa. Leaders of countries appear to have also embraced the important role of information; hence, regular briefings are held and the general public is informed of important development on the virus. In Nigeria, for example, the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 briefs Nigerians on regular basis. These briefings are aired live through broadcast media, yet, there appears to be misinformation spreading on social media about the virus. This raises the following questions: Why does misinformation about the virus persist despite the regular briefing? What should the Nigerian government do to avoid the growing misinformation about the virus? To answer these questions, the Editorial Board of *Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (IJIS)* commissioned a study wherein 600 social media users in Nigeria participated. The study was launched on June 12, 2020 and the survey link was shared among social media users in Nigeria. By August 20, 2020, the data collection ended and the responses from the social media users were analyzed.

Accordingly, we found that there is 76% chance that misinformation about the virus were shared on social media platforms in Nigeria. Furthermore, we found that 67% of the social media users in Nigeria are likely to believe information regarding the virus on social media platforms than they are to information coming from government sources. In terms of credibility rating, information from government sources were attached only 24% as compared to information from social media sources which scored 76%. We found further that 65% of the respondents indicated that the reason misinformation about the virus successfully thrives on social media platforms is because there is suspicion that the Nigerian government is using COVID-19 as a conduit to siphon public fund. Although majority (82%) of the respondents noted that the virus actually exists in other parts of the world, their view was that Nigerians are mainly immune to the virus. Also, 67% of the respondents blamed traditional media for not showing images of victims of the virus on their hospital bed as was the case with other countries like United States of America, United Kingdom, among others.

Based on the outcome of the survey, it is our thinking at *IJIS* that the Nigerian government needs to do more to gain the credibility of the citizenry so that they can listen to them in times of national emergencies such as COVID-19. To achieve this, we suggest the use of **TISA** approach. **TISA** stands for:

T-Transparency

I-Inclusiveness

S- Sincerity

A-Approachable

To be transparent in the management of emergencies like COVID-19, the government needs to disclose information about the issue to its citizens and to the minutest details. The people need to see fact and figures about every step that the government takes. This will require that the Nigerian government also makes use of social media platforms to ensure that there is openness in the handling of issues related to the virus. Where needed, pictures and video footage should be used. There should be promptness in government's response; else, it will give room for suspicion.

Closely related to transparency is the issue of inclusiveness. The Nigerian government must carry the citizens along in the handling of the outbreak. In the current social media era, when citizens are shut out, they converge on social media platforms to discuss. When they are denied access to certain information, they create information from situations around them which may not be true (misinformation) on social media platforms. This, in turn, breeds misinformation. The only option that the government has left is to carry the citizens along. Continuous interactions with the citizens through social media platforms can be a good option. It is not enough to create social media accounts and churn out information to the citizens; there must be rooms for interactions between the citizens and government officials because where that is disregarded, it will give room for misinformation.

Sincerity is another important approach. Generally, the citizens are usually suspicious of their government. The only way to earn the trust of the people is through sincerity. In this direction, the government must avoid all sorts of propaganda and deceit mechanisms. The people must be told the complete truth on all aspects of the outbreak; half truth is as good as falsehood.

Finally, government exists to serve the public, and government officials must demonstrate this in their handling of the outbreak. The citizens must be able to approach government officials, and this must not be physically; it can be done through social media platforms. In situations where a big wall is erected between government officials and the citizens, it will only give room for the spread of misinformation. For us at *IJIS*, we are convinced that misinformation about COVID-19 which has become prevalent on social media does not just happen, it happens because a wide gap exists between the government and the masses. It is our thinking that the **TISA** approach holds the potential to combat the increasing spread of misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria.

References

- Gever, V. C. & Ezeah, G. (2020). The media and health education: Did Nigerian media provide sufficient warning messages on Coronavirus disease? *Health Education Research*. doi:10.1093/her/cyaa020

Sun, P. Lu, X., Sun, W., & Pan, B. (2020). Understanding of COVID-19 based on current evidence. *Journal of Medical Virology*. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmv.25722>.

World Health Organization, (2020). WHO Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) dashboard Retrieved from https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAjwfmf_4BRABEiwAGhDfSfDYZXDsFK0BEdfjyRnp5oqMEho45w2fgaL4zUYNU0enWXgW2CAQRoCoH0QAvD_BwE

Wu, Y.C, Chen, C.S, Chan, Y.J (2020). The outbreak of COVID-19: An overview. *Journal of the Chinese Medical Association*, 83(3) - p 217-220doi: 10.1097/JCMA.0000000000000270

Gever, Verlumun Celestine

Editor