



COVID-19 Pandemic: Does 'fake news' aid the spread of COVID-19?

By James Yashi, Sightsavers Nigeria and Alice Siakah Perkins, COUNTDOWN Liberia, on behalf of COUNTDOWN

Our names are James Yashi and Alice Siakah Perkins. Both of us are working on the COUNTDOWN research consortium in Nigeria and Liberia respectively. In this blog, we share cross- country experiences on the widespread misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic and the threat to the NTD programmes in our countries. In March of 2020, both countries were hit by the pandemic and have been facing impacts as other countries across the globe, including deaths, illnesses and economic despair.

James: By mid-March of 2020, the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic had hit Abuja and Lagos, the two biggest cities in my country Nigeria. International flights were suspended from coming into the country and inter- state journeys from any of the 36 states to another were restricted by government order. Land borders were immediately shut and one could feel the atmosphere becoming suddenly tensed. Traffic at the community markets and shopping malls were increasing by the hour and things generally were taking a new turn. It then dawned that one needed to get essential commodities such as food, sanitary and first aid medicines and stock before an imminent lockdown which was already staring everyone in the face is officially declared.

By the time I returned to my workstation to continue preparation towards evaluation of some MDA activities lined up on the ongoing COUNTDOWN scale up study in my state, I received an email from the director, Rachael Thomson about decision taken to suspend further field research activities until it is certified safe to continue. It left me wondering about the magnitude of the pandemic in her country the UK and other regions of the world like America and Asia. I then concluded, "obviously, this oncoming COVID-19 tsunami will alter a lot of things by the time it is over, including the research activities we have planned in the COUNTDOWN scale up study".

Alice: I was bewildered at the speed with which the ever- bubbling Broad streets and waterside in the heart of Monrovia were closing down. "Within a twinkle of an eye, persons who were sightseeing by the banks of the famous Atlantic ocean in the country's capital have disappeared". The famous Cape Hotel was deserted, Black Mamba became literally dry and nobody was willing to shake the other's hands or hug the African way, rather there was a sharp switch to the Indian namaste- greetings by pressing palms of the hand together and placing it near one's chest with tips of the fingers pointed upwards. The fear was palpable and remembering the Ebola (EBV) outbreak few years ago, people were beginning to avoid physical contact with others as medically advised. The thought of the Liberia Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) activities (MDA & Coverage survey) which were to begin soon in June and July clouded my mind and the potential impact of the pandemic on the planned activities was becoming a daytime nightmare.

"Within a twinkle of an eye, persons who were sightseeing by the banks of the famous Atlantic ocean in the country's capital have disappeared" (Alice, Liberia)

Then, the misinformation started to spread.

James: Back in Nigeria a rumour broke out that Mr President's Chief of Staff, Alhaji Abba Kyari had been infected and must be isolated away from his post and family to control potential spread. The index cases earlier reported in Lagos had soared and number of deaths alleged from the virus were increasing gradually. Then my fear was confirmed when the Federal Government announced a total lockdown of Lagos and Abuja with an extension to Ogun State which borders Lagos. By this declaration, all social and religious gatherings were suspended till further notice.

The 'fake news' virus

A religious leader with a large follower base somewhere in a North Western state rejected the idea of locking down worship places as a preventive measure. He said in a sermon with a congregation in defiance to the government order that COVID-19 is a farce. Then after a congregational prayer, a youth group of over 500 persons went on procession into streets of the state capital singing in a native language that Mallam (teacher) has said there's nothing like corona virus, we are also saying there's nothing like corona virus. The video of the procession went viral on the social media thereby raising doubts about the disease.

The penultimate week, the same preacher had preached to older male congregants in a native language (translated to English) "we know an epidemic when we see one. In this country- in Kano, when there was outbreak of cholera, we saw the bodies of over 500 persons that died from the plague, we saw when they were taken to the grave yards and buried, we saw when the undertakers returned from the funerals, but in this case where are the bodies of those dying from the corona virus?" He then concluded that COVID-19 is a farce! And the crowd cheered.

Another preacher said there is nothing like corona virus anywhere. That people's bodies are only reacting to electro magnetic rays from the newly launched 5G telecommunication masts recently mounted in some cities in the country and the solution is simply to deactivate and bring the masts down. From these, I tried to reconcile what the mainstream media was saying about the pandemic with what I hear from compatriots and could figure out real gaps!



Photo credit: EPA-EFE / Neil Hall

For instance, about a month into the lockdown, a vendor I occasionally buy fruits from advised that I should not allow myself to be fooled by the media stunts on COVID-19. For him, God is a fair distributor who gives everyone their shares of good and evil. He added, some years back Africans were plagued with Ebola and this time around the dice has shifted, white people now have the corona virus. He digressed, when Ebola was ravaging us in Africa, the white people went about their normal activities and now that the equator has revolved, they should face their corona and stop the media hype.

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Alice: The index case in Liberia was reported on March 17, 2020 of a government official who had travelled to Switzerland a week before and thereafter, from his home and others began to come down with the virus. The government in the midst of this, mobilised hundreds of contact tracers to identify anyone who came in contact with someone infected with the virus. Conversely, denial and stigma about the virus was and is still making it difficult for the teams to do their work and the misinformation has continued to spread like wildfire. Fake news claims that COVID-19 is being falsely reported by Government to earn external support in form of donations, meaning that it does not exist in Liberia because there are no bodies in the streets as were seen during the Ebola outbreak. Though others believe it is real but could not abide by the stay at home order due to harsh economic situation that made daily feeding a tug of war. Reluctantly people conceded, "something must kill a man, either corona or hunger, each of us should decide". People began to go out in numbers thereby increasing the number of cases.

"Reluctantly people conceded, 'something must kill a man, either corona or hunger, each of us should decide'." (Alice, Liberia)



Photo credit: economicstimes.indiatimes.com

James: Meanwhile, the President's Chief of Staff in Nigeria Alhaji Kyari was later reported dead from complications of the virus and was buried on 18 April 2020 at the Military Cemetery in Gudu area of the Federal Capital Territory. The funeral was broadcast live on the National Television Authority and by several big privately run media outlets like the African Independent Television, Channels Television and others. Did that clear doubts about the disease? Not exactly, some people still believe that corona virus targets the rich and the mighty in the society like the late Abba Kyari who is reported to have contacted it from Germany, others said to be at risk are top politicians like the Kaduna and Bauchi state governors who once announced they were infected but received care and are now cured.

"Some people still believe that corona virus targets the rich and the mighty in the society like the late Abba Kyari who is reported to have contacted it from Germany" (James, Nigeria)



Interment of the remains of the late Kyari. Photo credit: The AfricaReport

In the ongoing fight, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) under the coordination of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 release daily updates on number of confirmed cases; those discharged from isolation centres and number of deaths. They also provide breakdown of cases according to states of the federation. However, some residents do not feel it is enough to allay scepticism that have accumulated over time about the disease. In fact, some rather prefer to see live scenes of patients being attended to by doctors like routinely shown by international media giants like CNN than just seeing figures on television screens.

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S/N	STATE	Number of Cases
1	Lagos	10144
2	FCI	1792
3	Oyo	1306
4	Kano	1200
5	Rivers	1056
6	Edo	962
7	Delta	912
8	Ogun	782
9	Kaduna	703
10	Fatsina	549
11	Bauchi	500
12	Gombe	492
13	Borno	486
14	Ebonyi	395
15	Plateau	337
16	Jigawa	317
17	Imo	303
18	Abia	302
19	Enugu	261
20	Ondo	244
21	Kwara	217
22	Nasarawa	206
23	Bayelsa	185
24	Sokoto	151
25	Osun	116
26	Akwa Ibom	86
27	Adamawa	84
28	Niger	84
29	Kebbi	76
30	Zamfara	76
31	Anambra	71
32	Yobe	59
33	Benue	47
34	Ekiti	43
35	Taraba	19
36	Kogi	4
TOTAL		24567

Daily breakdown of cases by state in Nigeria for 28th June, 2020
Photo credit: Channels News

COVID-19 CASE UPDATE

490 NEW CASES CONFIRMED

28th June, 2020

TOTAL CONFIRMED

24567

DISCHARGED

9007

DEATHS

565

NCDC Toll Number: 08009700010

Twitter/Facebook: @NCDCgov/ COVID19.NCDC.GOV.NG

A daily update on COVID-19 for Nigeria for 28th June, 2020. Photo credit: Channels News

Alice: In Liberia, where disruption of MDA for lymphatic filariasis and schistosomiasis were recorded due to the pandemic, we stand the risk of having increased burden particularly if distrust for the health system persists like this. Vulnerable population may start refusing any drugs given to them said a visibly concerned Health practitioner spoken to. She added, this will be a setback on the London Declaration on NTDs 2020.

James: In Nigeria the case may be worse. Public trust which is required to fight the pandemic may be the missing link if evidence- supported campaigns are not rolled out soon. The use of face masks and social distancing rules put in place by government of most states may be disregarded when a large spectrum of the society is not adequately sensitised about the pandemic. It is perhaps not enough to sponsor jingles and advertisements in television and radio alone, rather a thought be given to what the messages are meant to address and how right or wrong are the current messages being passed.