



## **COVID-19 Pandemic**:

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

By James Yashiyi, Sightsavers Nigeria and Alice Siakeh Perkins, COUNTDOWN Liberia, on behalf of COUNTDOWN

Our names are James Yashiyi and Alice Siakeh 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.

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

By the time I returned to my workstation to continue preparation towards evaluation of some MDA

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

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

famous Atlantic ocean in the country's capital have disappeared" (Alice, Liberia)

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

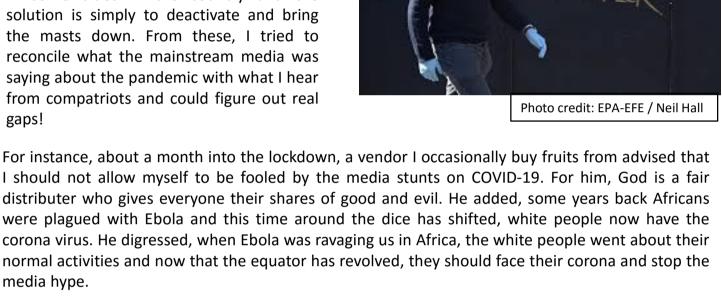
## defiance to the government order that COVID-19 is a farce. Then after a congregational prayer, a

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 from the newly launched telecommunication masts recently mounted

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! media hype.

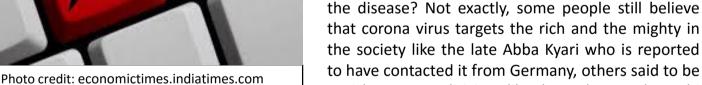
in some cities in the country and the



"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" (James, Nigeria) 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) **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



the African

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)

broadcast live on the National Television Authority and by several big privately run media outlets like

at risk are top politicians like the Kaduna and Bauchi

Independent Television, Television and others. Did that clear doubts about

discharged from isolation centres and number of deaths. They also provide breakdown of cases

Interment of the remains of the late Kyari.

Photo credit: The AfricaReport

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. "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." (James, Nigeria)

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

	Katsina	549		
11	Bauchi	500		
12	Gombe	492	ACC NIEW CACEC CO	CHIEDMAED
13	Borno	486	490 NEW CASES CO	UNFIKMED
	Ebonyi	395		
15	Plateau	337		
	Jigawa	317	28 <sup>th</sup> June, 2020	
	Imo	303	20 30110, 2020	
18	Abia	302		
	Enugu	261		
	Ondo	244		04545
	Kwara	217	TOTAL CONFIRMED	24567
	Nasarawa	206	TO IAL COTTI HAMED	<b>Z</b> 4507
	Bayelsa	185		
	Sokoto	151		
	Osun	116	DICCULADATA	0007
	Akwa Ibom	86	DISCHARGED	9007
	Adamawa	84		
	Niger	84		
	Kebbi	76		
	Zamfara	76		
	Anambra	71	DEATHS	565
	Yobe	59		
	Benue	47		
	Ekiti	43		
	Taraba	19		
36	Kogi	4	NCDCT-II Con Non-land	0000700010
	TOTAL	24567	NCDC Toll-free Number: 0	80097000010
	COVID19.NCDC.GOV	Ng Ndb	Twitter/Facebook: @NCDCgov/ 0	
aily bre	eakdown of cases by	state in	A daily update on COVID-19 for Ni	•
•		1 1	Pho	to credit: Channels New
•	for 28 <sup>th</sup> June, 2020			
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current messages being passed.

Rivers

	TOTAL CONFIRMED	24567			
	DISCHARGED	9007			
	DEATHS	565			
1	NCDC Toll-free Number: 080097000010 Twitter/Facebook: @NCDCgov/COVID19.NCDC.GOV.NG				
,	A daily update on COVID-19 for Nigeria for 28 <sup>th</sup> June, 2020. Photo credit: Channels News				
of MDA fo	r lymphatic filariasis and	schistosomiasis we			

**COVID-19 CASE UPDATE** 

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

Calling time on Neglected Tropical Diseases