

EXECUTIVE STATEMENT

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected all aspects of society in a way that has never been seen before. The health sector, economy, political terrain, and the media have all been shaken with the quick spread of this pandemic. **The essence of this brief is to explore how this pandemic has affected the core focus areas of the Center for Applied Ethics and Political Communication in Africa (CAEPOCOM Africa) which are:**

- Applied Ethics
- Gender and Sustainable Development
- Media Literacy
- Political Communication and Good Governance

We would explore how medical ethics and media ethics have been troubled by this unprecedented phenomenon and what measure practitioners should take to ensure that their ethical values are not compromised. We would examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected both genders and what political actors have uttered, how they should have divulged their opinion, and the impact of the message being communicated by political actors. Finally, we made policy recommendations on how best these issues raised should be addressed to ensure that post COVID-19, there is a wholesome restoration of all sectors of the society.

COVID 19 PANDEMIC SO FAR

The news on coronavirus (COVID-19) has spread to nearly every country in the world since it first emerged in China, towards the end of 2019. More than 11 million people are confirmed to be infected, while more than 532,404 deaths have been recorded worldwide, with about 628 deaths recorded in Nigeria. Coronavirus belongs to a family of viruses that causes disease in animals. COVID-19 is closely related to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) which swept around the world from 2002 to 2003.

The source of the coronavirus is believed to be a “wet market” in Wuhan, China, which sold both dead and live animals including fish and birds. Markets, where animals are sold, pose a high risk of viruses moving from animals to humans because hygiene levels are difficult to maintain if live animals are being kept and butchered on the same ground. In most cases, these markets are densely populated with animals, allowing diseases to spread rapidly from one animal to another, and ultimately to humans.

Like cold and other flu-like viruses, the COVID-19 is spread via droplets passed out when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The droplets land on surfaces, and are picked up by other persons, and therefore spread further. People get infected with the virus when they use their contaminated hands to touch their mouth, nose, or eyes.

Various conspiracy theories have been circulating the media, concerning the real origin of the virus. Some conspiracy theorists opined that the virus somehow escaped from a Chinese lab, either by accident or design. However, in other reports, this has been said to be untrue, and scientists studying the virus have linked it to Bats, stating that it probably moved to another animal, which passed it on to humans.

Also, it is noteworthy to mention that some world leaders have directly linked the outbreak of this disease to an attempt by its country of origin (China) to take over the world. Some also blamed China and the World Health Organization for being insincere about the details surrounding the origin of the virus. Particularly, Donald Trump, the United States President, has thrown so many attacks at the Chinese government and has been very critical of the World Health Organisation. In April, he stated that the WHO “mismanaged” the pandemic, has been slow to respond to the crisis and is “China-centric.” In one of his statements, he referred to the virus as a “Chinese virus”, and in another press conference, he stated that he had seen pieces of evidence to show that the virus came from a Chinese lab. Recently, it was also reported that he said “WHO should be ashamed of itself, it is like a PR agency for China”

Regarding the spread of the virus, findings revealed that a person can be infected though asymptomatic, and therefore unknowingly infect other people. This limited the ability of public-health tools to contain the spread. This development created a high degree of fear among world leaders as the rate at which the virus spread was unprecedented. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, the WHO and Professionals in the Health sector advised that people should stay

away from crowded places, or most preferably stay at home. This gave birth to the popularization of the “social distancing” phenomenon. Health officials have advised that the most sensible and urgent thing to do, to contain the outbreak and to “flatten the curve”, is for people around the world to remain in self-isolation, as “social distancing” may not be good enough to curtail the virus. Almost all human activities were immediately put on hold, as there was total lockdown in many countries, and health professionals worked hard to minimize the spread of the virus. As expected, this dealt a heavy blow on the economy of many countries, because the labour force was no longer available. Sports, education, business, aviation, agriculture, tourism, and entertainment, amongst others, were the sectors affected by the pandemic. The most countries affected were the third world countries, because prior to the pandemic, many of these nations were running their economy at the brink of an economic meltdown. In fact, many businesses had to embark on temporary or total layoff of employees due to incapacity to remunerate workers and pay wages.

The first case of the novel virus in Nigeria was confirmed in Lagos on 27th February, 2020. The “patient zero” in Nigeria was reported to be an Italian citizen who worked in Nigeria. He was reported to have fallen ill on arrival from Italy to Nigeria, through the Murtala Muhammed International Airport, on 26th February, and was transferred to Lagos State biosecurity facilities for isolation and testing. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control has since then kept up its responsibility to test, trace, identify, and isolate persons infected by the virus, as directed by the WHO. As of 7th July, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Nigeria is estimated to be 27,564, affecting 35 states of the federation (including the FCT).

Regarding the provision of a vaccine for the novel virus, scientists around the world have noted that it will take a minimum of 12-18 months to develop, test, and ascertain the viability of a vaccine for the virus. However, many pharmaceutical companies and virologists around the world have put all hands on deck to ensure that this time duration is shortened to the barest minimum. The United Kingdom and Germany kick-started human trials for the virus in late April 2020; with the hope that success would be recorded. Some of the volunteers for the trials were people who had already contacted the virus and recovered after a few weeks of isolation and treatment. The potential vaccine being tested is said to have been found in Chimpanzees.

Despite the scientific opinion that there is currently no cure for COVID-19 and that any experimental formula should be rigorously tested to see if it is safe and effective, in Africa, the Madagascar President, on 20th April, 2020, launched a COVID-19 cure, which was named “COVID-Organics”, made from the Artemis plant. The President confirmed the viability of the cure by stating that the Malagasy Institute of Applied Research (IMRA) tested the cure on two people, and the herbal tea proved effective in seven days. Though the WHO stated that there is no evidence that the “Madagascar cure” for COVID-19 is viable, the herbal tea has been dispatched to Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Republic of Congo, DR Congo, Tanzania, and The Gambia.

Howbeit, in contrast to the advice of health professionals, after 7-8 weeks of lockdown, many countries of the world began to withdraw from lockdown regulations, and gradually reopen their economies. Nonetheless, laws are enacted and enforced by these countries to ensure that citizens adhere to guidelines provided by the health authorities, which mainly consist of the use of face masks in public places, social distancing, and disinfecting hands by applying hand sanitizers/washing. It is thus expected that while the test, treat, trace, and isolate initiative of the WHO is being implemented, businesses in these countries can reopen gradually, and hopefully, in the coming months, the human race would be back to normalcy with people proceeding with their daily activities.

COVID 19, POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND GOOD GOVERNANCE.

Political communication provides understanding of social and philosophical underpinnings to interpret and situate political contexts and gestures among key players; leaders, led and the media (Omotoso, 2017). Political communication is simply the application of communication strategies in achieving political goals. It involves ensuring that the people are regularly informed about the development and consequences of actions carried out by government. Governance, as understood by many development practitioners is frequently used to refer to certain positive attributes that organisations and institutions (often public institutions) should incorporate. These attributes include abstract concepts such as:

- Transparency
- Accountability

- Control of corruption
- Efficiency
- Inclusiveness
- Rule of law

Understanding the concept of governance as explained, a government that exhibits the above-listed attributes can be easily be said to be practicing “good governance.” The explanation above suggests that effective governance is mainly about setting rules, enforceable orders, directives, or stating recommendations.

The advent of this virus has shown that the social media phenomenon has transformed the nature of Political Communication to the extent that politics is now being driven on the social media platform. Since the start of this era, most political leaders make use of social media as the primary medium in which they share their thoughts. The Social media has made it easy for communication to be made directly between those in power, and the governed, and as such, there should be an infrastructure that gives way for access to credible and reliable sources of information

However, Political Communication among countries has been strained, creating long term effects on global communication. At a time when the world should unite against a common enemy, nations who are regarded as world powers such as the United States, Germany, Spain, France, etc., do not agree on the best line of actions regarding COVID-19, and as such, the instructions passed between the government and the people in these countries differ. This in turn has an effect on other countries, not just because they look up to these world powers, but also because all messages they send to their citizens reached the whole world. This has led to distrust and suspicion on the part of citizens of different countries around the world.

In relation to the sender of information, the issue of perception cannot be overlooked. The way a government is perceived goes a long way to determine people’s trust in the information they share. The Corona Virus pandemic has made the world to understand how political leader are being discredited. Credibility of information from their political leaders are being questioned. A significant amount of information shared by the government of some world powers (mainly China and the USA) has led to bulk-passing and blame games. This could mean that some parts of the

information communicated to the world are aimed towards economic and political interest, rather than an interest in the protection of human lives.

In the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the major challenge of many governments involves getting people to divert from their normal routines, in the name of public health goals. In most cases, they are even asked to forego engaging in the activities that provide daily sustenance. Most significantly, the pandemic has exposed the failure and vulnerability of different nations, which could be said to be as a result of “bad governance” and the governments’ pursuit of personal ambitions, rather than the public good. Though many organisations and groups of people have at different times, campaigned against the government to ensure their actions are people-oriented, the current situation has shown that these efforts yielded no results. In the words of Claudia Baez Camargo, the Head of Public Governance at the Basel Institute of Governance, “COVID-19 reveals the weakness of populism and isolationism...” The level of corruption in different countries has been exposed by the pandemic, as news reports of all the activities of different countries during this period have circulated the media. Some of the policies adopted by different governments to curb the spread of COVID-19 in their individual countries have been met with citizens’ criticisms and in some cases, hostility. International communication has propelled developing countries to adopt measures that are foreign to the systems and climates within which they operate. While countries fill the media with reports of infected cases and deaths, not much is shared by government with the masses on how those discharged are treated. The political communication of countries on the Covid 19 pandemic is filled with uncertainties which have posed great concerns to the masses at large.

The global pandemic has shown that in many countries, the major sectors of government, such as health, economy, education, etc., have not been shielded with strengths that would withstand unforeseen/futuristic challenges. As soon as the pandemic started, the dilapidated and inadequate facilities in the health sectors of many countries were exposed. Also exposed is the over-reliance of many countries on certain resources, especially countries producing and exporting crude oil. The world witnessed a sharp drop in the consumption of crude oil as more than half of the world population were asked to “stay at home.”

Summarily, it is evident that the pandemic has brought to fore, the many wrongdoings of governments around the world, and how the interest of the masses has not been considered most

important in many governments. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the government is responsive and considerate of the rights of its citizens while focusing on the attributes of good governance stated earlier. Claudia Baez Camargo also stated that “Today, as we are caught in the midst of this pandemic, we have a golden opportunity to vigorously push for a global agenda that raises consciousness about protecting public goods.” In most developing nations of Africa, provision or otherwise of palliatives to cushion the effect of the pandemic on vulnerable citizens has been problematic. There are speculations that the palliatives are not reaching their targets, thereby threatening governance. The marriage of good governance and a well-structured political communication would ensure that the masses are considered most important, and there is a smooth communication between the people and the government.

COVID 19 AND GENDER

Women and Men are being affected by coronavirus in different ways. Most notable are the issues that arose due to the social isolation measures put in place and the restrictions in movement by various governments. One of such is Gender-based violence. Many people are trapped with their abusers and have no access to support services. These assaults are aggravated by the threats to financial security such as loss of jobs and slash in salaries; economic and social stress has also contributed to the strain. A lot of studies and measures have been put in place to tackle this issue but are flawed in the sense that they concentrate on one gender; women and girls. In Denmark, the government had prepared for a rise in women seeking shelters but there was an unexpected rise in men who need shelters because of crises caused by coronavirus (Olsen, 2020).

In Nigeria, men have been victims of attacks by security officials trying to enforce the lockdown. In a report by the National Human rights commission, about 18 males have been killed by law enforcers since the lockdown began in 30th march (Khalid, 2020).

Furthermore, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights pointed out the pandemic has deepened gender inequalities as women are burdened with caring for children at home, and with most schools closed, women have taken over the roles of teachers, caring for the sick and elderly. Some women who are both the financial providers and caregivers are said to be the most affected and those who were able to get extra help cannot do so because of the precautionary measures for safety. Men who had lost their jobs are going through financial stress and psychological trauma. In some homes, the pandemic has brought about a change in social

norms as many fathers who rarely participated in child care are circumstantially forced to take up responsibilities in the home and assist in home-schooling. This we believe is a great step in ensuring a change in gender norms.

COVID 19 AND APPLIED ETHICS

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised a lot of ethical questions as regards the response by various groups and sectors in addressing the outbreak.

Professional & Medical Ethics

In the health care system, the debate on if there is adequate protective gear, testing, monitoring, and research for possible vaccines and drugs for the virus is ongoing. In some countries, the limited access to intensive care is the major problem, another is the decline in the provision and uptake of non-coronavirus related treatments (Huxtable, 2020).

There has been a global shortage of protective gear for health workers and this has left them vulnerable and at a higher risk of contracting the virus. In Nigeria, the Minister of health at the press briefing of the presidential task force disclosed that over 113 health workers have been infected with the coronavirus. This he blamed was due to health professionals' lack of training in managing infectious diseases dealing with coronavirus cases, more reasons why the government is against private hospitals handling coronavirus cases, and also infected persons giving false details about their travel history and symptoms exposing health workers to the virus. One of the basic principles of medical ethics is Autonomy. This brings up a dilemma of either giving up personal data for public safety and the right to control what happens with individual bodies. So an informed, competent adult patient can refuse or accept treatment, drugs, and surgeries according to their wishes, and this decision must be respected by everyone even if it is not in the best interest of the patient. But in a pandemic as this, the health promotion and preventive code 8.11 suggests that physicians who work in the public health capacity should uphold standards of medical professionalism, by implementing policies that appropriately balance individual liberties with social goals of public health policies. Therefore, health workers should enlighten patients and communities on public wellbeing threats and their potential harm to others.

Nigeria on the 18th of May, 2020, received the samples of what has come to be known as the “Madagascar coronavirus cure” which has attracted mixed reactions by different bodies and still

awaits the approval of WHO. The National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and also the National Institute for Pharmaceutical Research and Development (NIPRD) have been charged to analyze the drug. Issues surrounding informed consent, protection of human subjects, the fairness of the testing, and eventual distribution of the cure or vaccine are the ethical questions to be considered during the development of a COVID-19 cure or vaccine. Despite having an urgency to develop a vaccine or cure, seeing that without one, we may not return to our normal life, there is still a need for due process to be followed in the creation, approval, and production, and not cut corners to make things to happen fast.

Media Ethics

The media plays as much vital role as the health workers during this pandemic because the need to tell a story without creating panic or any form of anxiety has become imminent. There is a thin line between the media's responsibility to tell the truth as it is and the compulsion of not adding to the public's anxiety. Mass-self communication is on the increase and citizens are unable to identify the trusted and reliable source.

The traditional press briefing sessions has been replaced by broadening press briefing room which can be found on Twitter and other social media sites and there is a cogent need for people to have trust not only in the source but also in the medium of communication. The media needs to ensure that reports are accurate and factual. There is a need to ensure that reports on coronavirus receives the prominence it deserves but certifying that the language used is proportional to the risk facing the nation.

The rights to privacy as regards people infected with coronavirus has been upheld by the media. What we rather see is high profile individuals using social media to disclose their status, not minding what the consequence to their privacy may be. This move has helped citizens who are in doubt to believe that the virus exists.

Everyone has something to say as regards their views and opinions about the virus. According to Muler (2020), the stories on coronavirus are in three categories. First, are stories containing health advice, information about the spread and on what the government and other authorities are doing. Second, are on the economy, scarce resources, and the third are of stories linked with conspiracy theories. Some religious and political leaders with large followership hold controversial views

about the virus and it is important that in a bid to avoid or curtail the infodemic that we are in, journalist and reporters must uphold the opinions of experts, medics and scientist with relevant credentials as regarding information surrounding the coronavirus and ensure that the instructions and guidelines government has given are clear. Also, complicated information like data, levels of risk, and so on should be made easier to process.

As much as the info space is crowded, the media has the responsibility to point people to credible and reliable information and resources as well as avoid all forms of speculation. The media need to stand up as the watchdog it is claimed to be.

COVID-19 AND MEDIA LITERACY

The novel COVID-19 virus gained popularity towards the end of 2019, and has since the start of 2020, taken over the global media space. Since then, the media has been saturated with information regarding the virus, with attention shifted from business, sports, entertainment, and others, to its source, origin, and prevention/treatment. Media organisations have continually reported information on the virus and how different governments of the world are tackling it, based on the peculiarities in their countries or region. Consequently, led by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the global media has been bombarded with campaigns giving details on the virus, its source/origin, prevention and treatment, how to “stay safe” and most importantly a piece of advice to “stay at home”. This information has been communicated simultaneously via all the available media platforms. Significant numbers of health professionals and purported public health experts have contributed media messages, regarding the virus. However, it was discovered that since the advent of the novel virus, there have been different forms of disinformation and misinformation regarding the origin, prevention, treatment, and other trends emanating from the development of stories about COVID-19. Dis and misinformation has saturated the media space (especially social media). One of the major results these misleading information has shown is a heightened level of fear amongst members of the public, which arguably led to an increase in mortality, in the last 2-5 months. Consequently, some media organisations then again began to pass important information in correcting the wrong notions passed about the virus, and emphasis was placed on the trustable sources of information. This then brings to mind the place of media literacy in a time like this. Prior to the COVID-19 era,

International Organisations like The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation, in collaboration with Civil Society Organisations, NGOs, and other bodies, have made efforts to find out the issues surrounding the transfer of information and how it affects the lives of members of the public. With a foresight on these trends in disinformation, in 2007, The United Nations proposed the Media Literacy concept, which has since then been received enormously and globally popularized.

The ability to navigate the media and meaningfully engage it for both private and public good is referred to as media literacy. It is a powerful and crucial tool. Media Literacy includes all aspects of critical thinking, psychological reasoning, ethics, and technology, applied in analyzing media contents. According to the National Association of Media Literacy Educators, media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication. Media literacy beckons to understand the kind of content the receiver absorbs, how it is retrieved, how it is perceived, and the awareness that each message is a product of another's ideas, with personal opinions and mission. It can be asserted that only a few understand the effect of the media on individuals engaging it and the society at large. Media literacy is broad and all-encompassing. It is applicable to virtually all works of life, especially in this age, where the world has become a global village.

As a result of concerns on public health and safety of the lives of citizens, the COVID-19 era brought about a situation whereby heads of government or their representatives are required to convey information to the public, at a much higher frequency than previous times. It may be assumed that whatever comes out of the mouths of the government is true and factual, however, this has proven to be untrue. Also, there is an abundance of information on the communication landscape, which has led to an increased level of "mass self-communication", and members of the public are unable to identify trusted and reliable sources. Many stories have been narrated about COVID-19 and its consequences, and certain questions were raised; did the US start the coronavirus? Is the EU failing to support and falling apart? Is the virus a weapon against China, or is the whole crisis created by the global elite? All of these claims and speculations are often false or inaccurate but have been circulating extensively on the internet for months. The virus has brought forth a wave of misinformation that is rapidly gaining ground on social media. A more

outrageous or even hilarious of these statements is the alleged 380 Belgians catching the virus through an act of group sex. Some of these stories are more easily believable, especially when shared on social media. The WHO in one of its reports stated that communication regarding COVID-19 is an “infodemic”. WHO explains that infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation, and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people. The term was used by the World Health Organization to refer to (mostly false) information about the COVID-19 outbreak. “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Munich, Germany, in mid-February, referring to fake news that “spreads faster and more easily than this virus.” In the month of March, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres tweeted “Our common enemy is COVID-19, but our enemy is also an “infodemic” of misinformation. To overcome the coronavirus, we need to urgently promote facts and science, hope and solidarity over despair and division.

Placing utmost importance on this issue, the WHO created a team of “WHO Mythbusters” who are working with search and media companies like Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and others, to counter the spread of rumours, which include misinformation like the virus cannot survive in the hot weather, that taking a high dose of chloroquine medication can protect against the virus, and that consuming large quantities of ginger and garlic are equally advantageous. According to news reports, these companies are aggressively filtering out unfounded medical advice, hoaxes, and other false information that could risk public health. In a rare move, Facebook and Twitter have taken down a post from a head of State that falsely stated that a drug was working everywhere against the coronavirus. Consequently, Neil Walsh, Chief, Cybercrime and Anti-Money Laundering Section, at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), advised that people should get information from trusted sources, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations.

It is easy to “follow the crowd”, and this is problematic when people share information without verifying sources. This is especially true in the case of social media. For example, many false

pieces of information are passed on WhatsApp and ‘forwarded as received’. People may believe misinformation because they seek to blame, generalize, affirm pre-existing beliefs, and so on. Even well-educated people with the highest level of education and intelligent quotient fall victim to misinformation, and the impact of this will grow as the COVID-19 crisis continues. Media fragmentation, fear, and uncertainty have created the perfect atmosphere for misinformation to thrive.

In a recent survey of many countries, one in three people have said that they feel the news has exaggerated the pandemic. In the same survey, some people were aware that misinformation was a problem. However, just because people are aware it exists does not necessarily mean that they are able to accurately gauge whether something they read is true. Despite a large number of misinformation articles on the internet, only a minority of people surveyed said that they had come across a lot of it.

Those creating misinformation during COVID-19 may do it to influence the public opinion in a foreign country, achieve foreign influence, create hate against a particular ethnic or religious group, to justify or criticize a government response to the crisis, and other inordinate ambitions. For example, The United States President has been criticized for reiterating that as opposed to what the world believes, the virus was deliberately developed in China, in an attempt to take over the world. This could be seen as being true because of the position he occupies. However, there are no facts to justify the correctness of his claims.

Like some governments, politicians, individuals, and companies all over the world attempt to use the virus’ outbreak to further their personal interests, it is imperative for both the conveyors of information and the readers to practice media literacy, which primarily requires one to verify sources, read beyond headlines, crosscheck information, listens to experts, and apply common sense. Doing this is not only practicing media literacy, but it is also the start of a healthier society where the media can be free from lies and untruthfulness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

Having seen how the coronavirus has affected the four focus areas, we recommend the following:

1. The need for an infrastructure that will help citizens identify trusted and reliable sources.
2. There is a need to develop African Political Communication Model that will be tailored to fit the African political terrain.
3. All persons handling political positions and are involved in political communication must be Media and Information Literate.
4. The situation of essential services like education and health care being tied to economic muscles must be addressed.
5. The committee of nations needs to revisit the global health care structure and all systems of the world to checkmate to what extent a nation's sovereignty puts others at risk.
6. There is a need to build infrastructures that are capable of collecting data, analyzing data, and recording evidence, so as to avoid this issue of mimicking and adopting policies and recommendations without tailoring them to our own peculiar characteristics.
7. Nigerians at all levels need to be encouraged to fact check and determine the credibility of messages and their sources before sharing such messages.
8. Nigerian government needs to create a framework for communicating during a pandemic and if possible adapt the model used in managing the Ebola crises especially through the mass media.
9. Journalists should apply the highest ethical standards in reporting during a pandemic
10. As much as journalists strive to tell the truth, they should try not to add to the public's anxiety by choosing the language and tone of their reports carefully.
11. In helping and creating safe spaces for victims of gender-based violence, a balanced approach should be put in place that will have in consideration of both genders.
12. Security officials should be trained on how best to enforce governments' guidelines during a pandemic without the use of brutal force.

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