

Challenges Faced By Community Radio in Countering the Covid-19 Infodemic in Kenya; A Case of Anyole Radio

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic not only posed a threat to global health systems but also posed a significant threat to the global information system particularly through the rise of the infodemic; the rapid spread of misinformation; catapulted through the use of social media. With the instantaneous nature of social media coupled with the unregulated and free orientation, traditional media such as radio faced a significant challenge keeping up with rapid misinformation spread particularly in countering misinformation on the Covid-19 pandemic. This study examined the challenges faced by community radios in countering misinformation on the Covid-19 pandemic. Anchored on the agenda setting theory, the research evaluates whether legacy media such as radio maintains a strong position in setting the agenda for media conversations or whether this role has been usurped by new media such as social media. A case study design was employed incorporating 396 respondents including radio listeners, journalists and health specialists. A mixed method sampling combining quota sampling and purposive sampling was used with questionnaires and interviews being used as the research instruments. From the findings, it was established that community radio was faced with challenges both in the information flow and radio operations tied to the orientation of community radios. Rumors and conspiracy theories posed the biggest challenge in the information flow while limited resources was identified as the biggest operational challenge. Internet sources and social media were identified as the biggest contributors to misinformation alongside other sources such as word of mouth. Sources such as print media and community radio were only identified by a minority of the respondents as contributors to misinformation. This was also observed in were challenges relating to language and cultural barriers, engagement and comprehension, balancing of opposing viewpoints.

Keywords: Community Radio, Health communication, Infodemics, Covid-19, Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a surge in the demand for information, which in turn allowed misinformation to infiltrate the information cycle particularly through online platforms such as social media and informal channels like word of mouth. This was due to the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, characterized by ever changing standpoints on the pandemic witnessed with evolution of research on various issues related to Covid-19 and the instantaneous, unregulated nature of the internet.

While the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to be a new worldwide distraction, pandemics have existed throughout human history, with several pandemics affecting the world prior to the internet era. According to Dotzert (2020), several pandemics have hit the globe, though tied to specific regions, ranging from the plague of Athens (430 BC), the Antonine plague (165), Cyprian plague (249), Justinianic plague (541), Black Plague (1347), Smallpox (1520), Great plague of London (1665), the First Cholera pandemic (1817), Third plague pandemic (1885), Measles (1875), Russian Flu (1889), Influenza (1918), Asian Flu (1957), Hong Kong flu (1968), HIV/AIDS (1981) and SARS (2002). In Africa, Ebola pandemics have been a threat though limited to specific regions while HIV/AIDS posed a serious health threat across the continent.

While past pandemics challenged medical preparedness and healthcare systems, Pergolizzi, LeQuang, Taylor, Wollmuth, Nalamachu, Varrassi, Christo, Breve and Magnusson (2021) observe that Covid-19 put information flow to the test, particularly with the instantaneous nature of the internet. The emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic initially did not seem as a global threat with initial coverage of the pandemic portraying the pandemic as a Chinese pandemic. This draws similarities the SARS pandemic which also originated in China with muzzling of information allowing the pandemic to catch the world unawares (Fidler, 2004). The Covid-19 pandemic also drew similarities with the SARS pandemic through communication on its origins with SARS being communicated by a retired medical professional (Fidler, 2004) and Covid19 being blown out of secrecy by Dr Li Wenliang (Zhong, Mozur, Kao and Krolik, 2021).

Originating in China, initial coverage of the pandemic was tailored around information control. Dong and Zheng (2020) observe that early coverage of the pandemic focused on sensitization, exaggerated reports, engendered panic and stress. This only changed with government intervention (Wang and Mao 2021). In Britain however, coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic was swift consistent with the growing global threat as emphasized by Coleman (2020) who notes how community radio in Britain used digital technologies to innovatively disseminate information on the pandemic. Just like in Britain, community radio in India played an active role in combatting Covid-19 misinformation. Laskar, & Bhattacharyya (2020) affirm that through the use of strategies such as folklore, Covid-19 warriors, storytelling and use of traditional media, community radios in India actively participated in countering Covid-19 misinformation. On the flip side, coverage of the pandemic in the USA was polarized and guided by political alignments (Hart et al., 2020).

Community radio in Africa has grown rapidly giving voices to underserved communities following the media liberation that came with the clamor for democracy in the early 2000's. Between 2000 and 2006, community radio in Africa grew by over 1386 percent, compared to 360 percent for commercial radio according to the BBC World Service Trust (Costa, 2013). While Kenya was the pioneer of community radio in Africa with the establishment of Homabay Community Radio in 1982 (Ngugi & Kinyua 2014), the growth of community radio in the country was hampered by restrictive single party administration under the guise of nationalization (Maweu, 2020) 11. It was only until the exit of the restrictive regime that community radio flourished with the country having over 23 community radio stations, over 200 community journalists and up to 6 million listeners (KCOMNET, 2018).

Community radio coverage of the pandemic across the continent was varied based on varied factors ranging from democratic spaces to the level of establishment of the medium. Pavarala (2024) notes that countries hit by frequent conflicts in the continent have well established Community radio structures. This would therefore give an edge in handling of misinformation such as on Covid. In Nigeria, community radio was well placed in ensuring information access during the pandemic (Ephraim, 2020) while in Kenya, coverage was tailored around major unfolding and events such as new cases or mitigation efforts. However, in Tanzania, coverage was full of skepticism owing to the then administration downplaying the pandemic (Kiptinness and Okoye 2021). In Kenya, the agenda was mainly driven by the government through daily pressers from government officials ranging from the president to ministers, permanent secretaries and other officials. A government information centre through a toll free USSD, website and call center was established with over 20,000 calls being made to the toll line 719 and over 300,000 users accessing the USSD code *719#. (Ondieki, 2020). Anyole radio relied on government updates from the portal, reports from journalists, listener experiences and health specialists who made appearances at the radio.

Statement of the Problem

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a huge demand for information. Individuals relied on various sources for information ranging from traditional and mainstream sources to new media sources such as the internet and social media. The instantaneous nature of new media meant that updates would frequently be churned through such sources even before making appearance in mainstream media sources such as radio. However, the unregulated nature of the new media allowed for misinformation through unverified sources and disinformation. While the spread of misinformation was at times fueled by malicious intent, at times indeliberate intentions such as simple sharing and forwarding further propagated the infodemic. This was further amplified by wide internet access and internet devices such as smartphones. Misinformation was an

active threat in Covid-19 mitigation efforts as affirmed by the World Health Organization through the coining of the word “*infodemics*”. The extent of misinformation was observed through disregard to public health measures, low vaccine uptake, apathy and a return to normalcy in the middle of a pandemic. This study aimed to identify some of the challenges faced by community radio in countering misinformation on the Covid -19 pandemic with a focus on challenges in the information cycle and operational challenges tied to the orientation of community radio.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify challenges faced by Anyole Radio in countering misinformation on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

1. What were the challenges faced by Anyole Radio in countering misinformation on the Covid-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges Faced by Community Radio in Countering Covid-19 Misinformation

Fluid nature of information and communication lapses

Pandemics, epidemics and disease outbreaks are usually accompanied by constantly shifting and evolving information. While this information could be related to regular updates, at times this information relates to scientific advancements which may affect effective disease management and control. Michelle et al (2021) affirms that initial media coverage of pandemics is often marred with mixed and unclear messages, widespread public confusion and attributions of incompetence toward health officials. While this is often driven by rapid changes in information and evolving standpoints on various issues, it brings about confusion until a clear standpoint is established. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kenyan government developed an information portal (<https://health.go.ke/covid-19>) which was a standard referent point for communication on matters the Covid-19 pandemic. Kiptinness & Okoye (2021) note that in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kenyan media paid little attention to the pandemic framing the pandemic it as a global pandemic rather than a local pandemic. This could be due to the origins of the disease in China far away from Africa. However, with the first outbreak in the country on March 12, 2020, media coverage of the pandemic clearly increased significantly (Ministry of Health, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic also witnessed different stands on various areas of mitigation and prevention such as use of facemasks. Ochu et al (2021) observe that evolving scientific knowledge resulted in instability in communication contributing to public mistrust. In Kenya, stakeholders expressed differing viewpoints, for instance, the then Health Cabinet Secretary initially voiced doubts about vaccinations (NTV Kenya, 2020) before later reversing this position (Citizen TV Kenya, 2020). This was also witnessed in the contradicting standpoints on use of facemasks by the World Health Organization (WHO) during the early stages of the pandemic (Chan, Leung, Lam & Cheng, 2020).

In a bid to communicate on the pandemic, lapses in communication may also lead to confusion. While health communication may be intended at behavior change, it must be well thought out and verified. Gaps and inconsistencies in communication may hamper mitigation efforts and also create an avenue for misinformation. When the first Covid-19 patient was disclosed to the public by the ministry of health in Kenya, lapses in communication brought about speculation and disbelief even though the ministry had aimed at championing for effective mitigation through her recovery journey. Dubbed patient zero, Brenda Ivy Cheprotich was expected to affirm the existence of the virus and affirm behavior change but gaps in her communication cast more doubts on her narration. For instance, varied number of dates on quarantine; 23 days (The East African, 2020) and 22 days (NTV Kenya, 2020), admission at Mbagathi hospital (Rubadiri, 2020) and Kenyatta hospital (Citizen TV). Lapses also emerged on another patient Brian Orinda who gave contradicting positions on knowing Brenda whom it was believed he had contracted the disease from (Asamba & Njeru 2020).

Infodemics and unregulated citizen journalism

At the height of the Covid -19 pandemic, misinformation was a real threat to mitigation efforts thus the World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term infodemics to refer to too much information which includes misleading and false information not only in digital but physical environments during an outbreak (WHO, 2021). In events of calamities such as disease outbreaks, there is often an upsurge in the demand for information and corresponding increase in the dissemination of information. However not all information shared during this period is factual, misinformation makes way into the communication cycle by individuals through deliberate or indeliberate intent. Infodemics pose significant risks to behavior and attitudes, thereby undermining mitigation efforts (Larson, 2018; Kim, Fast, & Markuzon, 2019).

The share culture in the internet age bypasses the verification of information with infodemics spreading fast and hampering mitigation efforts. Manganello et al (2020) insist that while misinformation has been a challenge in previous pandemics, it was more evident in the Covid 19 pandemics through conspiracies, disinformation, misinformation and untruths. Melki, Tamim, Hadid, Makki, Amine, & Hitti (2021) affirm that the spread of infodemics was catapulted by high trust in social media information and news sources and other informal means including interpersonal communication and clerics.

Operational challenges

Community radio by its orientation is faced with challenges which hamper its effective operation with these challenges being grounded on the definition and legal provisions laid out for community radio. Being a non-profit establishment, community radio is often limited in its operations unlike commercial radio. EcoNews Africa, BBC World Service Trust and UNESCO (2008) identify challenges around sustainability, lack of a clear identity, ownership, inadequate funds, job security and delay in frequency allocation as some of the challenges synonymous with community radio. These sentiments are shared by Tavhiso (2009) who insinuates that while community radio has the potential to bring about transformation, its always limited by a myriad of challenges especially in developing countries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a case study design to identify the challenges Anyole Community radio faced in countering Covid-19 infodemics. A case study was ideal in providing an in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by Anyole radio as emphasized by Stake (2010) who identifies a case study as ideal for in-depth understanding of a phenomenon.

Study Site

The study was conducted in Vihiga county, Western Kenya and limited to a 30 Kilometer radial distance from Anyole radio; the documented reach of the community radio. Respondents were engaged within Emuhaya, Hamisi, Luanda, Vihiga and Sabatia constituencies.

Sampling Procedure

The study employed a multi method procedure combining purposive and stratified sampling procedures. Respondents who had interactions and affiliations with Anyole radio were identified through purposive sampling and then subdivided into strata comprising of listeners, journalists and health specialists with a varied proportion for each stratum based on the actual population.

Data Collection and analysis

Data was collected through questionnaires and informant interviews. Questionnaires were used to collect data from listeners of Anyole radio with both closed and open-ended questionnaires being used to identify challenges faced by Anyole radio. A total of 384 questionnaires were successfully administered. Interviews were conducted

on 10 radio journalists and 2 health specialists. The interviews sought to identify challenges unique to these two strata from a broadcasting and health perspective.

The data from the study was then analyzed to identify challenges Anyole radio faced in countering the Covid-19 misinformation and grouped in the three different viewpoints.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher sought permissions from the Chuka University Ethical Review committee, from the board of Post graduate and a NACOSTI permit alongside all other necessary approvals and letters. Respondents were assured of confidentiality, dignity and privacy and their consent was sought in using their responses in the study.

FINDINGS

Rumors & Conspiracy theories

The greatest challenge Anyole radio faced in countering infodemics on the covid-19 pandemic was rumors and conspiracy theories; affirmed by up to 85% of the respondents. Rumors and conspiracy theories pose a great risk to mitigation of the pandemic since they could be spread through formal mediums such as the new media (internet) and informal media such as word of mouth. Rumors could be triggered by lack of media literacy skills, lack of access to factual information or constantly changing information during the pandemic. This is affirmed by Ochu et al (2021) who maintains that evolving scientific knowledge could lead to instability in communication resulting in confusion, misinformation and mistrust in the public and its in such environments that rumors and conspiracy theories thrive. The lack of media literacy skills could further amplify the risk of misinformation as Schwarz & Jalbert (2021) **assert** that at times, infodemics which include rumors and conspiracy theories could feel so true that depending on individual deciphering abilities could be mistaken for factual information.

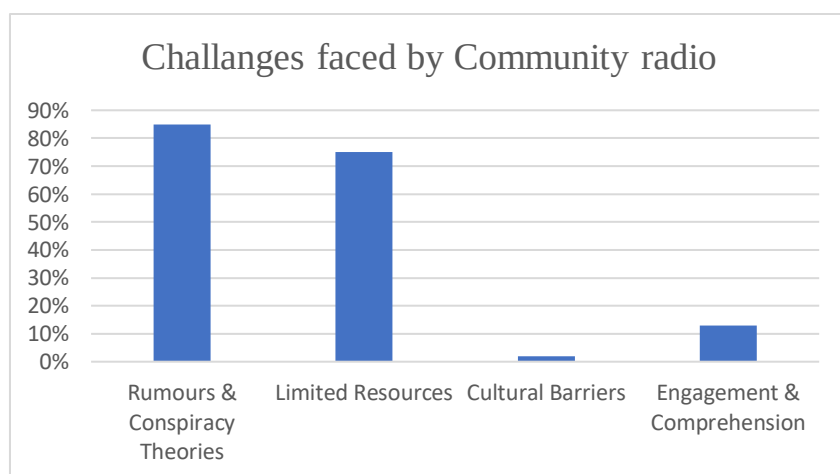


Figure 1: Challenges faced by community radio in countering misinformation

Limited Resources

Limited resources pose a significant challenge to community radio with up to 75% of the respondents agreeing to this. Challenges in resources have always been a common occurrence amongst community radio owing to the non-profit orientation. This has also shared by EcoNews Africa, BBC World Service Trust and UNESCO (2008) and Agrawal (2006).

Cultural barriers

Even though identified by a section of the respondents, cultural and linguistic barriers posed the lowest challenge to community radio in countering Covid-19 misinformation as only 2% of the respondents identified

linguistic and cultural challenges. By being audience first, community radio broadcasts to its audience needs and this includes cultural needs which may include language. Broadcasting to its audience in multiple languages (Kiswahili and Kinyore languages), Anyole radio effectively caters for its audiences needs and through the incorporation of cultural aspects such as rainmaking.

Balancing of opposing viewpoints

Anyole radio effectively balanced opposing viewpoints with only 7% of the respondents having a contrary opinion.

Engagement and Comprehension

As expected, only 13% of the respondents felt that Anyole radio did not effectively engage its audience and ensure comprehension of its content. Owing to the nature of community radio, content is usually tailored to meet the broadcast community needs. However, radio journalists felt that there were several challenges and put in place several mitigation strategies as captured below

Table 1: Challenge and mitigation table

Challenge	Mitigation
Denial of existence of the virus	Continued reminders and broadcast
Ever evolving information	Keeping up to date with information
Religious and cultural misbeliefs	Involving religious and cultural leaders in broadcast
Massive misinformation from other sources	Continued education through broadcast

On the other hand, health specialists noted that Anyole radio struggled with limited resources, balancing opposing viewpoints opinions, ensuring engagement and comprehension and addressing rumors and conspiracy theories.

SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the findings

The study revealed that there was widespread misinformation and Anyole radio faced several challenges in countering Covid -19 misinformation. It was observed that rumors and conspiracy theories tied to infodemics were the greatest challenge community radios faced in countering Covid-19 misinformation. Anyole radio was also faced with operational challenges traditionally associated with community radio; these challenges range from financial, technical, human, training and skills development. These challenges are not unique to Anyole radio but common amongst community radios owing to the non-profit orientation. The study also revealed that Anyole radio was effective in bridging cultural and linguistic challenges faced in mitigation of Covid-19 misinformation and would therefore be an effective medium where linguistic and cultural differences exist. Further, Anyole radio was effective in engagement, comprehension and balancing opposing viewpoints therefore positioning the radio as an effective medium in tackling challenges across these lines. It was also observed that while the new media such as the internet boasted of timely updates, community radio had a role to play especially through provision of factual information achieved through repetitive broadcast, keeping an up-to-date fact sheet, engagement of community leaders and health specialists in broadcast. Furthermore, it was observed that community radio stations were increasingly integrating new media tools, such as the internet in the dissemination of information prior to their top of the hour broadcasts in an effort to keep pace with the instantaneous flow of information.

Conclusions

The study revealed that community radio was faced with challenges in countering Covid 19 misinformation. While some of the challenges stem from the orientation of community radio which is usually based on a non-profit model, some challenges are emergent especially with the upsurge in the demand for information during emergencies such as health crisis.

Recommendations

1. To combat misinformation more effectively, community radio broadcasters and journalists need to go beyond traditional methods, adopting new strategies such as leveraging social media to match the rapid pace of information dissemination.
2. Given the dynamic nature of information during pandemics, community radio stations should remain updated with credible sources and establish a relevant fact sheet to guide programming

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