



HEALTH COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE MEDIA DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: CASE OF ZIMBABWE BROADCASTING CORPORATION TELEVISION (ZBC –TV)

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Abstract:

The paper reports findings from a study that explored health communication strategies employed by the media on the state of preparedness by the Zimbabwean government during the COVID 19 crisis by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television (ZBC-TV). The study adopted secondary data analysis. Data were collected using secondary sources. The study was influenced by the framing theory. The study found out that ZBC-TV used songs, road shows, commercial ads, dramas, musical shows on reporting the pandemic. The archival documents also revealed that ZBC-TV have used periodical updates as health communication strategies to educate the public about COVID 19. ZBC-TV also used Facebook showing staff from the Office of the President and Cabinet receiving the Covid 19 vaccine at the same time applauding positive response from Harare Metropolitan Province as front line workers surpassed the target under the first phase of Covid-19 vaccine roll out plan. The study concluded that the health communication strategies employed by ZBC-TV have been effective in increasing the societal awareness about health issues. ZBC-TV managed to reach out to the masses using

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both the television and by making use of the new media communication technologies. However, press censorship has been a challenge in publishing information concerning COVID 19 as the media house is not allowed to publish anything that tarnishes the image of the government. It is based on such evidence that the study concludes that ZBC-TV at some point distorted information to paint the picture that the government is doing all it can to contain the spread of COVID 19 and ensuring the safety of the public. The study recommends that the ministry should ensure freedom of information publicity, in which media houses, including ZBC-TV is not controlled by any political party of government. The government should also privatise ZBC-TV so that it will be answerable to the public and not few government officials.

Keywords: health communication strategies, Covid-19 crisis, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation

1. Introduction

The study focuses on health communication strategies employed by the media on the state of preparedness by the Zimbabwean government during the COVID 19 crisis by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television (ZBC-TV). Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television (ZBC-TV) is an authentic source of information Zimbabwe. Television (ZTV) pertaining to the coronavirus pandemic and after the National Lockdown for the benefit of the deaf and hard of hearing people in Zimbabwe got information. The emergence of 2019 novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 in Wuhan, China caused a public health crisis threatening the world. The virus which is transmitted by inhalation or contact with affected persons is spreading faster across the globe, and all nations have joined in the fight against the deadly pandemic including Zimbabwe. As the news media have the power to spread information through the dissemination of newsworthy information, it is necessary for this study to focus on strategies employed by the News media in communicating Covid-19 in Zimbabwe. Overall, this study examines health communication strategies employed by ZBC-TV during the COVID-19 crises in Zimbabwe. Specifically, it seeks to provide answers pertinent questions like, Did the strategies used by ZBC-TV to communicate Covid-19 promote public health, and the disease prevention and control in Zimbabwe?

2. Concept and scope

Communication plays an important role in the delivery of health care and promotion of good health among citizens. Communication is defined as the process by which the sender affects the behaviour or state of mind of the receiver Fiske (1990). Fiske (1990) places emphasis on how efficiently and accurately channels of communication are used by the sender to convey a message to audiences and are able to affect their behavior and lifestyle. The United States Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, (2004),

further states that communication serves the purpose of initiating action, giving information on needs and requirements, exchanging information, ideas, attitudes and beliefs, creating understanding as well as establishing and maintaining relations.

Health communication is the study and use of communication strategies to inform, educate and ultimately influence choices people make about their health and also community decisions that enhance good health. Nkanunye and Obiechina (2017). It is linked with the fields of communication and health and is structured in a way that it should achieve the ultimate objective of influencing choices one makes to have a healthy lifestyle. Health communication is becoming more and more recognized as a crucial element for personal and public health. Health communication's most noticeable application is in the area of health promotion and disease prevention Thomas (2006). Health communication as highlighted by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) should increase knowledge and awareness of health issue or solutions, this entails giving people adequate information about a disease and solutions that help prevent the spread and steps to take when affected. Thus, it can be argued that health communication reinforces the knowledge that leads to attitude and behaviour change for individuals. In so doing removing the myths and misconceptions about health issues crises. Whereas Thomas (2006), provides the basis on reflecting on the practice of health communication, the researcher goes a step further on examining health communication strategies employed by ZBC-TV during the COVID 19 crises in Zimbabwe.

3. Literature review

3.1 The role of media on health communication

It is argued that the media play a very crucial role in prevention and sustainability of healthy behaviour which makes society aware of health hazards. USAID (2017) explains that high assessment of the health care system is achieved through effective health communication through media. The utilization of behaviour change communication (BBC) activities by media in communicating health issues increases the awareness about family planning, motivates individuals to seek services and help them to successfully use their contraception methods of choice. However, Centre for Disease Control (2018) states that health communication through media increase the audience knowledge and awareness of any health-related issues. Also, media influence behaviours and attitudes are influenced towards health issues. On the other hand, Catala-Matamoros (2011) agree with the view that the media is significant in prevention and sustainability of healthy behaviour as he argues that health communication through media result of changes in behaviour of the public of community members towards certain health issues. This clearly shows that media play a crucial role in health communication which is the mandate of this study to examine the role of ZBC in relation to COVID-19 since few studies have been conducted on such health crisis, ZBC-TV in Zimbabwe have been playing its role in encouraging the communities of Zimbabwe to protect their families, communities, and the nationwide. ZBC-TV have been Partnering with World Health

Organisation to develop health communication plans for specific health emergencies such as Cholera, Ebola and Corona-Virus (WHO Zimbabwe, 2020). In a health emergency, there is an urgent demand for information since various audiences will have very different information needs hence ZBC-TV have been essential in evaluating the target audience's level of concern or fear. As such ZBC-TV have been essential in creating awareness of existing threats and benefits to health, for example, during the outbreak of cholera in 2008 (Chigudu, 2016). This implies that ZBC-TV have been essential in providing knowledge of various threats to health. However, it is crystal clear that there is acknowledge gaps in Literature since very few studies have been carried out on the role of ZBC in health communication with no studies on its role to COVID-19. This clearly shows that studies in Zimbabwe have focused on the role of media (ZBC) to cholera and accidents with no studies on Corona virus which is the mandate of this study to fill in the gap.

3.2 Key engagements of health communication strategies

Various health communication strategies have been implemented across the globe. South Africa in partnership with the United States of America implemented the Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) Network as a medium for health communication among other variables. Addiction Technology Transfer Center, (2018) state that the ATTC Network has been made in recognition of the well-established link between substance misuse and increased risk of HIV. In addition, Myers, Carney and Wechsberg (2016; Scott-Sheldon et al. (2016) state that these initiatives within the media channels enables the individuals who misuse alcohol and other drugs (AOD) to be aware of the risk behaviors such as unprotected sex and injection drug use as it increases the risk of HIV infection. Hence South Africa serves as a particularly important site for international ATTC support because it is at the epicentre of the global HIV crisis Avert, (2017). On a different view, Rehm et al (2003) states that the ATTC Network in South Africa has failed to change the behaviour of individuals towards the spread of HIV since it has the highest rate of new HIV infection. Despite these insightful arguments, there remains a scholarly gap in as far as the role of ZBC-TV on the manner it covered COVID 19 for the period under review.

In the media environment, there have been the rise of many actors portraying different messages they think is the truth about certain health issues. Ratzana, Sommarivac and Rauha (2020) state that in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this challenge has reached an unprecedented level due to the high volume of information being circulated both by media outlets and private citizens. Shi, Poorisat and Salmon, (2018) agreed with Ratzana et al (2020) as they posit that the loudest voices in the room may in fact be perpetrators of false information, which is often the case with anti-vaccination disinformation. As such, health communicators need to proactively seek ways to be louder by speaking to those most vulnerable to misinformation with the information most meaningful to them. The COVID-19 Tracking Survey (2020) shows that 66% of respondents reported the side effects of a potential COVID-19 vaccine were

worrisome for them (CUNY New York City COVID-19 Survey Week 12, 2020). This vulnerability to mis/disinformation about vaccine safety is both an important target and argument for proactive health communications to stand out. The findings of the study show that % of respondents said they would accept a COVID-19 vaccine, 19% said they would decline it and 19% were unsure (CUNY New York City COVID-19 Survey Week, 2020). These results indicate that not enough people would be willing to be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity against COVID-19 in New York City. These findings show that governments and public health sectors worldwide need to deeply understand emerging public attitudes to COVID-19 vaccination, and plan and act now, well before a vaccine is available. Thus, one can note that, various media organizations across the globe need to proactively seek ways to have the attention of the majority so as to achieve their purpose against the dissemination of false information. Despite these insightful arguments, there remains a scholarly gap, in as far as the role of ZBC-TV in the manner it covered COVID 19 for the period under review.

More so, the state media need to fight false information. Although the information includes both accurate and inaccurate content, it is the false content that has the potential to severely harm the public. In March 2020, hundreds of Iranian citizens died after ingesting alcohol in a bid to treat COVID-19 as a result of misinformation circulating on social media (AP NEWS; 2020 Apr 27). Actors spreading misinformation or disinformation provide content that fills data voids and addresses urgent concerns that the public expresses. As a result, health communicators are called to revise their strategies to respond to inaccuracies that are already circulating, while also picking up on early signals of rumours and prevent them from spreading further. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO has launched an initiative called Myth busters where the organization directly addresses misconceptions and fake information (WHO, 2020). Thus, the need for state media in partnership with WHO to fight false information.

4. Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative secondary data analysis, where secondary data were collected by someone else for another primary purpose. The utilisation of this existing data provides a viable option for researchers who may have limited time and resources (Latham, 2007). The study is mainly analytical in nature predicated upon secondary information collected from various publications, reports, Periodicals, books, journals and newspapers. Some Internet sources and websites were also accessed for the purpose of the study. The researcher made use of books, articles, reports and thesis that were done on the same topic (Cresswell, 2017). The data were analysed through content analysis. The researcher will use content analysis and observation in the study.

4.1 Health communication strategies employed by ZBC-TV on reporting COVID 19 pandemic

The study found out that ZBC-TV used songs in reporting the pandemic, the songs include together we stand strong against COVID by Albert Nyathi and Mpofu. This song encouraged people about wearing masks and adhering to Covid measures. There are various strategies which ZBC-TV deployed during the COVID 19 Pandemic for the period under study. The songs focused on encouraging the public to take heed of the measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus. The songs touched on key components like wearing of masks, sanitizing of the hands, social distancing, avoiding necessary travel and embrace these as the new societal norms. According to Mhiripiri and Ureke (2018) educational awareness campaigns have been adopted by educating people against COVID 19. Efforts have been combined with the music industry to broadcast music which educates the populace about the pandemic. Furthermore, every ZBC-TV presenter or journalist was given a mandate to always remind people on measures to prevent the spread of COVID 19 such as COVID 19 regulations.

Field trips were adopted as a communication strategy, the Use of field trips for educational awareness as a strategy during the COVID 19 Pandemic for people who lived in remote areas such as in Nyanga, Binga or Chipinge who has no access to ZBC-TV. The article found out that ZBC-TV has made field trips to rural areas so that they can inform people without TV about the pandemic, which is also an element of rural reporting. The field trips involved the gathering of people at a local business center and experts would address them about the virus and answer the questions from them. This is in line with the view by, Rural Health Information Hub (2017) which expressed that effective health information, communication strategies include public service announcement, field-trips and workshops which help to influence social norms, increase availability of support or improve their health conditions.

More so, the researchers further established that commercial ads have been conducted by ZBC-TV in Zimbabwe for example Ministry of health and child Care, NASH Paints, and OK Zimbabwe. These commercial ads have managed to help in educating the community. ZBC-TV has been making use of dramas as a strategy for educational awareness during the COVID 19 Pandemic. The dramas emphasized the need for people to stick to stipulated Covid 19 rules like, avoiding unnecessary movements, staying at home, social distancing, sanitizing and proper wearing of masks every time. Furthermore, Saraf & Balamurugan, (2018), are of the view that the development of materials such as dramas and videos on social norms, increase availability of information and support which leads to improvement in health conditions (Mhiripiri, and Midzi 2020)

The archival documents also revealed that ZBC-TV have used periodical updates as health communication strategies to educate the public about COVID 19. According to these archival documents, ZBC-TV managed to spread the news on update on Covid 19 cases like, new infections (local transmissions or infections from returning residents), the number of recoveries and deaths. As well as measures from the government through

news bulletins and live broadcasts such as imposition of lockdown dates and essential services required to operate during such a time, which in turn influences behaviours and attitudes of the majority towards COVID 19. As such, it is crystal clear that health communication strategies implemented by ZBC-TV during COVID 19 have been effective in influencing behaviours and attitudes of the majority towards COVID 19. Catala-Matamoros (2011) agree with the view that the media is significant in prevention and sustainability of healthy behaviour as he argues that health communication through media result changes in behaviour of the public of community members towards certain health issues.

5. Effectiveness of the health communication strategies

In a bid to understand the effectiveness of the health communication strategies by ZBC-TV, the researcher found out that the health communication strategies which were implemented by ZBC-TV during COVID 19 have been effective in increasing the societal awareness about health. This is so given that everyone in this country is now aware of COVID 19. Apart from getting updates on the television we have managed to capture online audiences using various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Broadcasting live on these social media platforms enabled ZBC-TV to reach out to thousands of viewers every day on these platforms which shows that a greater percentage of the population had access to information.

The findings stated that health communication strategies implemented by ZBC-TV during COVID 19 have been helpful in increasing the societal awareness about health issues. ZBC-TV managed to reach out to the masses using both the television and by making use of the new media communication technologies. (Hornik, 2010) is of the view that the mass media have a huge impact in bringing a positive behaviour of the masses or prevent a negative behaviour with respect to health given that many people are now social media addicts.

The health communication strategies by ZBC-TV, have been potent since it has managed to motivate individuals to seek health care services (Mhiripiri, & Midzi, 2020). Thus, many people have been aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID 19 in which they are now aware of the emergency number to call, first aid measures and quarantine methods in order to protect themselves. All these have been provided by ZBC-TV together with other media platforms in fighting against COVID 19. According to Redman (2011), the programs of health on various media platforms help to modify the use of safety restraint among adults or the behaviour of cardiovascular risk.

According to Mhiripiri and Ureke (2018) only 40% of the people in Zimbabwe still watch ZBC-TV on a daily basis. This has been as a result of the availability of many channels on satellite dishes, poverty resulting to lack of technology to have access to ZBC-TV hence they have created various platforms where ZBC-TV can broadcast on-line such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. With such platforms we have managed to spread the news about COVID 19.

Study findings indicated that ZBC-TV has made an essential impact in spreading information about COVID 19 given that it has made use of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. According to Centre for Rural Health (2015) the health communication strategies, also include internet and social media, which have been adopted by ZBC given that ZBC-TV have been broadcasting online such as on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube

Furthermore, the health communication strategies employed by ZBC-TV have been effective in increasing the societal awareness about health issues. ZBC-TV managed to reach out to the masses using both the television and by making use of the new media communication technologies. ZBC-TV during COVID 19 have been effective in motivating individuals to seek health services quickly if they begin to see the signs and symptoms of Covid 19 on themselves or anyone close to them.

The study also concluded that ZBC-TV has made an impact in spreading information about COVID 19 given that it has made use of social media platforms such as face book, you tube and twitter. The study also concluded that health communication strategies implemented by ZBC-TV during COVID 19 have been effective in the removal of misconceptions from the mass media about COVID 19. The participant gave an example of the issues around COVID 19 vaccine in which ZBC-TV have been invited.

6. Challenges associated with health communication using television broadcasting in Zimbabwe

Since ZBC-TV is receiving funding from the government for it to spread the news about COVID 19, the press censorship has been too tight. According to Mhiripiri and Ureke (2018) they are not allowed to broadcast any content that tarnishes the image of the government even if they are failing to curb COVID 19 and that hospitals are overwhelmed due to lack of essentials like ventilators, protective equipment for staff and medication. Hence forth, they only publish what supports the government.

Study findings also pointed out that the press censorship has been a challenge in publishing information concerning COVID 19. The station is not allowed to publish anything that tarnishes the image of the government and try to distort the picture that the government is doing all it can to contain the spread of COVID 19 and ensuring the safety of the public (Lunga and Musvipwa, 2021)

According to Mhiripiri and Ureke (2018) ZBC have been experiencing the challenges of fighting the wrong information from social media platforms. Mass media have become the enemy of truth in which people now believe the information they get from the social media platforms. ZBC-TV has been facing challenges of wrong information peddled by new information and communication technologies platforms like social media (Lunga, & Musvipwa, 2021) This has affected the effectiveness of its strategies in educating the public about the pandemic. This clearly shows that the coming in of new media communication technologies platforms like social media has increased the information flow where peddling of falsehoods is rampant. Information sources are

too many posing dangers as many actors portray different messages, they think is the truth about certain health issues. Ratzana, Sommarivac and Rauha (2020) states that in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this challenge has reached an unprecedented level due to the high volume of information being circulated both by media outlets and private citizens.

More so, archival documents show that ZBC-TV has been facing various challenges which include lack of funding. This is true given that ZBC-TV failed to raise the amount of money which was stated under the budget for COVID 19. According to Mhiripiri and Ureke (2018) ZBC-TV failed to raise money for use carry out the activities which we have planned to do in order to educate the public about COVID 19 (Gorny, 2009). They have been facing financial crisis such that we were not able to conduct all the activities which were scheduled to be done, employees were reduced so as to meet the available funds such that we were not able to reach out to many places as planned. Findings revealed that ZBC-TV have been facing a challenge of inadequate resources. Melanie et al. (2010) state that the campaigns through the media have been hindered by lack of the provision with proper resources among the reporters of health.

The study found out that press censorship has been a challenge in publishing information concerning COVID 19. The station is not allowed to publish anything that tarnishes the image of the government and try to distort the picture that the government is doing all it can to contain the spread of COVID 19 and ensuring the safety of the public. Which shows that ZBC-TV is owned by the ruling party. More so Government also introduced Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020. [CAP. 15:17 Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020. The instrument was put in place to curb spreading of falsehoods as any person who publishes or communicates false news was liable to the penalty provides or imprisonment for s stipulated time frame (Homa, 2020). This further enhanced media censorship and as they would rather support the status quo or risk imprisonment if they dared expose some ills.

The findings pointed out that the ZBC-TV have been facing challenges of wrong information peddled by new information and communication technologies platforms like social media. This has affected the effectiveness of its strategies in educating the public about the pandemic (Mhiripiri, and Midzi, 2020). This clearly shows that the coming in of new media communication technologies platforms like social media has increased the information flow where peddling of falsehoods is rampant. Information sources are too many posing dangers as many actors portray different messages, they think is the truth about certain health issues. This study also concluded that ZBC-TV have been facing the challenge of low health literacy among medical reporters, inadequate resources and inadequate feedback from the public.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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