

INVESTIGATING THE ROLES OF EFFECTIVE JOURNALISM PRACTICES IN HEALTH CRISIS
MANAGEMENT: A CASE OF CHOLERA OUTBREAK IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study gives an expose on the role of effective journalism practices in health crisis management, taking the cholera outbreak in Nigeria as a case study. In the context of carrying out this research, several inextinguishable variables were pinpointed, such as the concept of journalism, effective journalism, health crises, cholera as a health crisis, and many more. The study highlighted that effective journalism is unequivocal in managing health crises and forms a formidable bridge between the public and essential health information. During a health emergency outbreak, rapid dissemination of accurate and reliable information can significantly impact public health outcomes. Many roles of effective journalism in managing the cholera outbreak were outlined, but among them were: information dissemination, advocacy, public awareness, and education. Access to affected areas and government restrictions, accurate and timely information, ethical dilemmas and resource constraints, technical knowledge and communication barriers, and many more were outlined as the challenges faced by journalists in reporting information on the cholera outbreak. The study concluded by adding that effective journalism practices are crucial in managing health crises like the cholera outbreak in Nigeria and that by providing accurate information, uncovering root causes, adapting to digital changes, collaborating with health experts, and overcoming challenges, journalists play a vital role in protecting public health. The researcher recommended that there should be an establishment of formal channels of communication between journalists and health authorities to ensure that accurate and timely information is available.

KEYWORDS: Journalism, Health Crises, Management, Cholera, Outbreak and Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Effective journalism plays a pivotal role in managing health crises, acting as a bridge between the public and essential health information. During a health emergency outbreak, rapid dissemination of accurate and reliable information can significantly impact public health outcomes. According to Fagbamila, Abdulkarim, Aworh, Uba, Balogun, Nguku, Gandi, Abdullahi, Okolocha, Kwaga, and Waziri (2023), cholera is an acute public health issue with the high potential to cause many deaths, spread quickly and eventually into nationally, and seriously affect travel and trade. Therefore, response to the outbreak has to be well-coordinated, timely, and effective (Dan-Nwafor, Ogbonna, Onyiah, Gidado, Adebobola, Nguku, & Nsubuga, 2019). Hence, journalists are tasked with the need to inform the public about the risks, preventive measures, and treatment options, thereby helping to contain the spread of the disease and mitigate its impact on communities.

The role of journalism in health crisis management extends beyond merely reporting facts. It involves investigative reporting to uncover the root causes of outbreaks, holding authorities accountable, and ensuring that the public remains informed about ongoing efforts to control the situation. This proactive approach helps build public trust and encourages community participation in preventive measures. Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) noted that effective journalism can shape public perception and influence behaviour during health crises, making it an essential tool in disease control and prevention. The Global Task Force on Cholera Control (2019) mentioned that communication with the public during a cholera outbreak is critical not only for the rapid control of the outbreak but also to keep the public informed and reduce the risk of social, political, and economic turbulence.

During cholera outbreaks in Nigeria, journalists face numerous challenges, including accessing accurate information from health authorities, combating misinformation, and addressing public skepticism. Despite these obstacles, effective journalism practices have been instrumental in raising awareness and educating the public about cholera. Ufuoma (2021) highlighted the importance of media coverage in promoting health education and influencing health-seeking behaviour among the populace. By providing timely and accurate information, journalists can help reduce the spread of cholera and save lives.

Moreover, the role of journalism in health crisis management is not limited to traditional media outlets. The rise of digital media has transformed how information is disseminated, with social media platforms playing a significant role in reaching a broader audience. This shift has created new opportunities and challenges for journalists. According to the International Federation of Journalists (2020), the use of social media during health crises has increased the speed at which information spreads but also heightened the risk of misinformation. Journalists must navigate this complex landscape to ensure that credible and accurate information prevails.

In addition to informing the public, effective journalism practices involve collaborating with health experts and organisations to provide comprehensive coverage of health crises. This collaboration ensures that the information disseminated is based on scientific evidence and expert opinions. For instance, during the cholera outbreak in Nigeria, partnerships between journalists and health professionals have been crucial in producing informative and educational content. Bonfiglioli (2019) emphasised that such collaborations enhance the quality of health reporting and contribute to more effective crisis management. As the world continues to face health crises, the importance of effective journalism in crisis management cannot be overstated.

CONCEPT OF JOURNALISM

Information collection, writing, editing, publishing, and other activities that involve predominantly intellectual input are referred to as journalism. These outlets include daily newspapers, other publications, radio and television news programmes, and the Internet. The process of compiling and presenting news for general public consumption is referred to as journalism. It has been an integral part of contemporary society as a business, a governmental institution, and a popular culture. Dueze (2024) explained that journalism can be seen as a particular feature of the 1990s in many (Western) democracies.

Further, Zagidullina (2023) defined journalism as a type of public activity that aims at collecting, processing, and periodically publishing relevant information through

mass communication channels (press, radio, television, cinema, etc.); it is one of the forms of mass propaganda and agitation. Journalists' information should be socially conscious, influencing public opinion and worldview while presenting readers with a comprehensive understanding of the diverse range of occurrences, processes, and trends that make up contemporary reality. The knowledge should be on the laws that govern the growth and operation of society's political, economic, health, and ideological spheres.

Carlson, Robinson, Lewis, & Berkowitz (2018) hold that journalism refers to the systematic gathering, filtering, and circulating of information deemed to be news and in the public interest. In journalism, news is gathered, put together, and presented. Although journalists create a wide range of content for different media, all of their work is united by their emphasis on nonfiction material that is connected to current events. Furthermore, journalism is typically carried out in collaboration with a news organisation that compiles and disseminates journalistic content.

The gathering, preparing, and dissemination of news, along with related analysis and feature materials, is known as journalism. It can be done via print and electronic media, including radio, television, movies, books, blogs, webcasts, podcasts, social networking sites, and e-mail. The term "journalism" was first used to describe the reporting of current events in print, particularly in newspapers. However, as radio, television, and the Internet emerged in the 20th century, the term's definition expanded to encompass all forms of current affairs reporting in print and digital media. Nwanne (2016) explained that journalism is a report of things as they appear at the moment of writing, not a definitive study of a situation. The goal of journalism is to promptly convey the day's news to the attention of a restless public. Journalism is the creation and dissemination of reporting on the relationships between people, ideas, events, and facts that are current events and, to the best of the journalistic ability, inform society.

CONCEPT OF EFFECTIVE JOURNALISM

The idea of effective journalism has not received much discussion. In academic literature, the word "effective journalism" is rarely used. Therefore, in order to make clear what is meant by effective journalism, the terms effectiveness and journalism shall be defined independently. Effective refers to a situation where an action or item produces results (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). For something to be considered effective, it means that it has fulfilled its purpose or that the desired outcome has been reached. Deuze (2005) states that journalists perform a public service by gathering accurate, useful information and disseminating this information. Consequently, journalism that accomplishes its goals or yields the intended consequence is considered effective journalism.

Proficient journalists regard their occupation as a calling to public service, based on ethical principles that encompass monitoring and analysing intricate issues. For journalism to be successful, it must first be reliable. Porlezza (2019) explained that effectiveness in journalism is often seen as a fundamental norm: journalists are the main attributes of quality journalism, frequently putting accuracy at the top of their list. Furthermore, a lot of newspapers adopt a position on maintaining reporting accuracy, either by fortifying their adherence to moral principles, implementing quality-control procedures, or supporting campaigns that establish guidelines.

Moreover, Oberiri (2016) states that effective Journalism is a social institution that requires freedom to effectively function in society. It is essential to society because

it keeps an eye on things and offers a never-ending supply of knowledge, instruction, and socialisation. In order to make sense to the public, journalism also creates agendas, plans public debates and conversations, and analyses topics. By playing these functions, media serves as the voice and protector of the marginalised and downtrodden in society in addition to educating, informing, and socialising people. It also gives issues status, values, and meaning.

Aside from setting agendas and facilitating public debates and discussions, effective journalism also analyses stories to help readers understand them better. Through these roles, journalism not only educates, informs, and socialises; it also confers status, values, and significance to issues, thereby serving as the mouthpiece and defender of the voiceless and the oppressed in society (Sambe, 2008). Information is gathered through research and interviews, and then organised into an outline by skilled journalists. Following that, they write for and report for TV, radio, newspapers, and social media. Journalists use an inverted pyramid structure while writing, placing the most important material at the top, followed by the specifics, and finally more information. Unexpected events should be included in journalism, and it should be timely, straightforward, and relevant.

CONCEPT OF HEALTH CRISIS

A crisis is a mental condition characterised by internalised feelings of bewilderment and anxiety to the point that once efficient coping strategies falter and unhelpful choices and actions take their place. A health crisis, according to Chinengundu and Chakamba (2022), is a difficult situation or complex health system that affects humans in one or more geographic areas (mainly natural hazards), from a particular locality to the entire planet. A health crisis is a dangerous interruption that poses hazards to public health that are greater than what the healthcare system can handle. Health crises typically have a major effect on mortality, community health, and the economy. A health crisis is an emergency, such as a pandemic or epidemic that spreads internationally and affects a large number of people at once. Examples of these kind of emergencies include the SARS, Ebola, and Corona viruses.

Any major incident or crisis that has a health component that necessitates immediate action from the government due to a threat to humans, animals, plants, food, the environment, biology, chemicals, or unknown origin is considered a health crisis. The amount of persons impacted by its geographic scope, the illness, or the demise of the infectious process from which it emerges determines how severe it is. Memories can be warped, and perceptions are frequently changed. A health crisis is a change from the person's "status quo" since it entails the collapse of coping mechanisms that may have worked well in the past. A health crisis has the potential to rapidly harm, directly or indirectly, an exposed population (Peralta, 2008).

CHOLERA AS A HEALTH CRISIS

Cholera is an acute diarrhoea infection caused by the ingestion of food or water contaminated with *Vibrio cholerae*, either type 01 or 0139 (WHO, 2023). It's a medical emergency that causes dehydration and diarrhoea. Even in previously healthy individuals, cholera can be lethal if left untreated in a matter of hours. The bacteria in the small intestine creates a toxin that causes the disease's fatal symptoms. According to Dunkin (2023), the toxin causes the body to secrete enormous amounts of water,

leading to diarrhoea and a rapid loss of fluids and salts (electrolytes). When people are forced to live in cramped quarters without proper sanitation due to poverty, conflict, or natural calamities, the danger of a cholera pandemic is highest. Adults and children may be impacted. If cholera is not adequately managed or treated in a timely manner, it can be fatal.

Children still have this potentially fatal disease, even though it is completely avoidable and curable. According to UNICEF (2023), more than 1.1 billion people are at risk, with children under five (5) especially vulnerable. The absence of sanitary facilities and clean water sources contributes to the intestinal infection's frequent spread. The poorest and most vulnerable communities in the globe are disproportionately affected by cholera. The risk of cholera spreading is directly correlated with the availability of clean water and sanitary facilities. This implies that those residing in camps for internally displaced persons or refugees, as well as urban slums, are more at risk. This is due to the fact that occasionally the basic needs for sanitary conditions and clean water are not fulfilled.

Another factor in the cholera outbreak's expansion is climate change. The increasing frequency of significant rainfall and flooding leads to an amplified water cycle. As a result, people may have less access to clean water, increasing their chance of getting the water-borne illness. Families are particularly vulnerable to the sickness because they frequently use contaminated water, as do their children.

ROLES OF EFFECTIVE JOURNALISM IN MANAGING HEALTH CHOLERA OUTBREAK

An outbreak of cholera can be managed in large part by effective journalism. According to Blumberg (2009), cited in Garrido & Hurst (2021), outbreaks are eminently newsworthy, as the public has the right to be informed and the media are the key partners in the communication triangle with health officials. In order to make the public aware and prepared to defend themselves, journalists play a crucial role, especially in the early stages of an epidemic. Effective journalism plays the following crucial responsibilities in controlling the cholera outbreak:

- **Information Dissemination:**

Journalists tell the public about the cholera outbreak in a timely and accurate manner. According to Thomas (2020), journalists have at times both built and undermined public trust, serving as both a constructive source of scientific facts and a destructive source of rumour that tends to amplify panic. They report on the number of cases, affected areas, and trends. Educate the public on how to prevent infection by promoting good hygiene practices and safe water consumption and by informing people about the symptoms of cholera and what steps to take if they or someone they know shows signs of infection.

- **Advocacy:**

The media can promote laws and procedures that aid in controlling and averting cholera epidemics. This entails advocating for legislative adjustments that enhance the infrastructure for public health, sanitation, and clean water availability. The key to controlling and preventing cholera is advocating for long-term fixes, like enhancing water and sanitation infrastructure, to stop future outbreaks.

- **Public Awareness and Education:**

Public education and awareness-building around cholera are facilitated by journalism. This approach include dispelling myths and inaccurate information regarding cholera, which can incite fear or encourage risky behaviour. It also entails supporting public health programmes by emphasising their significance and promoting involvement.

- **Government Accountability and Collaboration with Health Authorities:**

When there is a cholera outbreak, journalists hold public health officials and governments responsible for their deeds or lack thereof. It is important to share data with parliamentarians and policymakers on the burden in endemic areas, the effectiveness of OCV, economic benefits, and indirect effects in the context of a comprehensive approach to generate interest and commitment for cholera prevention (Nayyar & Privor-Dumm, 2020). But this also entails looking into and reporting on government responses, the distribution of resources, and the success of initiatives, as well as putting public pressure on officials to take the required steps by drawing attention to response gaps. Effective journalism also frequently entails working with health authorities. This entails collaborating with health authorities to guarantee that the data presented is correct and current and acting as a channel by which health authorities can inform the public of critical information and updates.

- **Risk Communication:**

During a cholera outbreak, public communication is essential for the quick containment of the disease as well as for informing the people and lowering the possibility of social, political, and economic unrest. But the goal of risk communication is to make sure that everyone who could contract cholera is aware of the disease, how to prevent and minimise the risk of infection, and what to do in the event that someone becomes ill. In addition to addressing public concerns, the journalist makes sure that the material is accurate, consistent, and clear to prevent confusion.

- **Resource Mobilisation and Community Engagement:**

Successful journalism can aid in the mobilisation of resources to stop the epidemic. On the other hand, raising awareness of the impacted areas' needs—such as for clean water, sanitary conditions, and medical supplies—and promoting donations can help secure the funding required to stop and manage the cholera epidemic. Journalism plays a critical role in involving the community in response to the cholera outbreak by providing a forum for impacted individuals and communities to express their needs and experiences, as well as by showcasing and endorsing local initiatives and efforts to contain the spread.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:**

Journalists are able to track and assess the outbreak response, offering commentary and reporting on the success of measures. However, good journalism in managing cholera epidemics depends on covering the long-term results of the response efforts and examining data and trends to offer insights into the efficacy of various approaches. Furthermore, by keeping the public informed, holding authorities responsible, mobilising resources, involving communities, and pushing for required reforms, good journalism plays a critical role in controlling a cholera outbreak. Journalists assist

efforts to safeguard public health by containing the disease's spread and providing accurate and timely reporting.

CHALLENGES FACED BY JOURNALIST IN REPORTING INFORMATION ON CHOLERA OUTBREAK

Journalists face numerous challenges when reporting on a cholera outbreak. Musa & Ezie (2022) stated that despite the challenges faced, health authorities have been trying to bring the spread of cholera in the country under control by engaging in community sensitization. As mentioned by Miggo & Kangwerema (2023) and numerous scholars, the following are the challenges faced by journalists in reporting information on cholera outbreaks:

- **Access to Affected Areas and Government Restrictions:**

Affected areas may be difficult for journalists to access because of closed roads, quarantine zones, or isolated locations. Journalists who enter regions with high incidence of cholera illness must take extra precautions to protect their health, which may limit their movement and hinder their ability to obtain firsthand information. However, in an effort to control the narrative, governments may place limitations on media reporting. This could suppress news or result in an underreporting of the severity of the outbreak since officials might be reluctant to provide information or provide insufficient data, which would make it more difficult for journalists to present the story truthfully.

- **Accurate and Timely Information:**

Finding reliable and current information can be difficult, particularly in areas with inadequate data collection and reporting systems. In these areas, rumours and false information are common and can mislead the public and journalists. It can also be time-consuming and difficult to verify the facts in these settings.

- **Ethical dilemmas and resource constraints:**

Reporting on specific cholera cases or communities impacted by the disease might bring up ethical questions about permission and privacy since cautious and sensitive reporting is needed to strike a balance between the need to warn the public and the risk of spreading fear. Furthermore, because journalists may not have the necessary protective gear, medical supplies, or technical equipment to cover the outbreak safely and effectively, media organisations may not have the resources to devote to in-depth health reporting, especially in areas where the media industry is experiencing financial difficulties.

- **Technical knowledge and communication barriers:**

It can be difficult for journalists to interpret and convey complex epidemiological data in a way that the public can understand since they may lack the medical knowledge necessary to completely comprehend and accurately report on the technical aspects of cholera and its treatment. Furthermore, because it takes cultural sensitivity and knowledge to comprehend and respectfully report on cultural practices and beliefs related to health and sickness, journalists may find it challenging to communicate with affected populations or local authorities in multilingual regions.

- **Psychological stress and logistical issues:**

Reporters who cover cholera outbreaks, which frequently include witnessing extreme suffering and fatalities, may suffer serious emotional and psychological damage. However, burnout might result from the high-stress environment and lengthy hours needed to handle such a catastrophe. Communication networks might be disrupted by infrastructure damage or a lack thereof, which makes it difficult for journalists to convey stories or updates. Moreover, it might be extremely difficult to arrange lodging and safe, dependable transportation in the impacted areas.

- **Interference and Threats:**

Local communities can occasionally be hostile towards journalists, particularly if they are seen as outsiders or if the community has doubts about the motives of the media. A variety of players, such as criminal organisations, dishonest officials, or other organisations with a stake in information control, may threaten or harass the media.

- **Coordination with Health Authorities:**

It can be challenging to make sure that the material published by journalists complies with the policies and recommendations of health authorities, particularly when there are contradictions or lags in official announcements. It might be difficult to obtain interviews and information from medical professionals and health officials, especially during a crisis when they are preoccupied with their responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

Effective journalism practices are crucial in managing health crises like the cholera outbreak in Nigeria. By providing accurate information, uncovering root causes, adapting to digital changes, collaborating with health experts, and overcoming challenges, journalists play a vital role in protecting public health. As health crises continue to emerge globally, the importance of robust and ethical journalism cannot be overstated. Investing in the capacity and safety of journalists will enhance their ability to contribute to health crisis management and improve public health outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establishing formal channels of communication between journalists and health authorities can ensure that accurate and timely information is available.
- Media organizations should develop guidelines for the use of social media to disseminate health information, ensuring that content is verified and sourced from credible authorities.
- Media organizations and international bodies should ensure that journalists have access to the necessary resources and support systems. This includes providing safety equipment for those reporting from affected areas, access to mental health support, and ensuring fair compensation.
- Media organizations should enforce codes of ethics that emphasize the importance of fact-checking, avoiding sensationalism, and respecting the privacy and dignity of affected individuals.

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