

RISK COMMUNICATION AND POLITICS OF COVID-19 IN POST-TRUTH ERA IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is observable that across the globe, the notion of an objective truth assented to by all is dying down. As a result, a lot of issues in the world are becoming polarized cum politicized. Issues are no longer in black and white. They have become relative, and thus, indicative of a post-truth era. Ripple effects of this are seen in both minor and major issues today. At the heels of Covid-19, and upon seeing its ravaging effects in countries, World Health Organization declared it a pandemic by 11th March 2020. But because of relativism of truth, risk communications of this looming danger to mankind, in country after country, became muddled in politics, lies, disbeliefs, misinformation, and corruption. Observation of non-pharmaceutical protocols to limit the spread – in the absence of appropriate medicines and vaccines became polarized. In Nigeria, it was the #EndSARS protests that exposed some of the repugnant political practices like hoarding of palliatives discovered at different locations across the country; and thus, putting clouds of doubt on Covid-19 risk communications in an era marred by politics and relativism. Using conceptual analysis anchored to gate keeping theory, this article evaluates how politics has affected risk communication in post-truth era in Nigeria with a view to proffer lasting solutions that would lead to effective risk communication and reestablishment of objectivity of truth.

Keywords: truth, post-truth, risk communication, Covid-19, and politics

1. Introduction

With the volume of Covid-19 vaccinations going on across the globe, and mindful of the several millions of people already vaccinated, one can clearly begin to see the end of the Covid-19 pandemic era – except if taken is not care. If nation after nation do not let their guards down in terms of doing all the precautionary measures towards control and eventual elimination of this deadly disease, then the world is gradually getting to a post Covid-19 era. This article assumes, therefore, that the reader, already, has knowledge of what Covid-19 pandemic is, how it began in Wuhan China in spite of the controversial stories surrounding its origins, and the spread of the pandemic across the globe. In other words, this article focuses on a review of risk communications during the pandemic era, role of politics on handling of the pandemic in an era that is aptly described as post-truth era.

Truth is an essential value in journalism. As Patterson, Wilkins & Painter state “each traditional profession has laid claims to a central tenet of philosophy. [For instance] Law is equated with justice, medicine with the duty to render aid. Journalism, too, has a lofty ideal:

the communication of truth".¹ To communicate, therefore, is to communicate truth. Consequently, in risk communication that is undertaken to avert some perceived dangers, one must communicate truth. Nonetheless, as this article verifies, one of the problems of risk communication of Covid-19 pandemic is politicization of the pandemic and making it an adventure of enriching pockets of those at the corridor of power in Nigeria². There was high level of insincerity, lack of openness, poor administrative policies and betrayal of public trust on the part of government in managing the pandemic. At some levels of government, some personnel tried to be above board, while at other places, politics and deceit was the order of the day. The media too were consumed by those political polemics, divisiveness, and relativism of truth in their risk communication.

2. Truth and post-truth

Truth is what is. What is true is what is factual. However, today truth is being compromised. Constantly, there are clouds of doubts over every truth and every fact in the world. People are prone to doubt and to question even what were previously acceptable. Statements from suitably qualified public authorities that were previously accepted are now subjected to scrutiny. For instance, statements from World Health Organizations (WHO) about the ongoing AstraZeneca vaccines in Nigeria are doubted by a good number of Nigerians; and of course, uncrowded locations of the vaccination lay credence to this repugnance. Be that as it may, as Glanzberg points out, the controversy against truth did not start today.³ Not minding Glanzberg's position about truth controversies not being a contemporary phenomenon, the volume of incredulity at this historical time is huge. This goes to show that truth has become an endangered species – beseeched at all angles, at all times and by all generations. At this point, it is pertinent to point out that to understand truth, it is important to look at the compendium of human knowledge which began from philosophy to see what truth at its initial conception was.

Thus, from the foundations laid by Aristotle to that of Aquinas, as ancient as their thoughts maybe on truth, to the correspondence theory of truth in contemporary 21st Century, truth, has remained, and is still a value relevant in all human society. As the term *correspondence* indicates, this conception of truth, perceives it as corresponding to reality for it to be true. It has evolved from conception at the Aristotelian/Thomistic era to theory at the 21st Century. Truth is all about what corresponds to reality. According to correspondence theory, truth consists in the existence of "a fact in the world" which is built around what is stated by it. In other word, what is stated should correspond to the fact – out there and verifiably there in the world.⁴

According to correspondence theory, what is key to what is truth — is a relation between propositions and the world, which obtains when the world contains a fact that is structurally similar to the proposition. In other words, the basic idea of correspondence theory, as Tarski

¹ Patterson, P., Wilkins, L., & Painter, C. (2019). *Media Ethics: Issues and cases*, 9th ed. Boulder New York: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 24.

² Adejoke, A. (2020). How covid-19 lockdowns affect healthcare of non-covid cases, April 14, 2020. Retrieved on 21-01-2021 from: [//africanarguments.org/2020/04/14/howcovid-19-lockdowns-affect](https://africanarguments.org/2020/04/14/howcovid-19-lockdowns-affect).

³ Glanzberg, Michael, "Truth", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/truth/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/truth/).

⁴ Glanzberg, M. (2018).

(1944) quoted in Glanzberg and other sources have suggested, is captured in the slogan from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, "to say of what is, that it is, or of what is not, that it is not, is true".⁵ What is said to be true has to correspond to what is out there as fact, as datum, and as what is evident. That is what is true. What is said, is seen as it is said; and what is seen is said as it is seen: that is truth.

The correspondence theory of truth matches up with what is evident, what can be seen; and that puts it at the heart of science which is all about empirical realities or empirical investigations. Thus, empiricism deals with what is objective, observable, and verifiable. According to Rider & Peters:

truth would seem to be an obvious and everyday affair. We do not need it explained to us; in our way of life, truth and its cognate concepts (right, correct, accurate, real) and truth-telling activities are central to our institutions of science, politics, law, and education. But more fundamentally, it is part of the cultural infrastructure within which we exist and make sense of the world. It is one of a handful of abstract concepts that serve as a kind of intellectual scaffolding in our civilization.⁶

Unfortunately, truth is not always upheld by all; and most unfortunately, in the 21st Century, when mankind is inundated with flood of information, it becomes challenging to figure out where truth lies, and humanity has arrived at a time ascribed as post-truth era. "Post" is the opposite of "pre" and clearly calibrates a time after the stage it is describing; like today, the world is talking about "post Covid-19" era. It is sad to think of truth as post – indicative of an era when truth is gone or where truth is struggling to prove itself. It was George Orwell who said "in times of universal deceit, telling the truth will be a revolutionary act".⁷

It is pertinent to mention that the term "post-truth" emerged in November 2016 "when the Oxford Dictionaries named it 2016's word of the year. After seeing a 2,000 percent spike in usage over 2015, the choice seemed obvious".⁸ Another word that appeared that same time is Brexiteer as Britain planned on leaving Europe. It is important to point out as well that this time was the beginning of the Donald Trump era in politics. It appeared as if facts and truth do not matter anymore. This is what made one author Daniel Boorstin to assert that "truth has been displaced by 'believability'".⁹ The expression "believability" has turned to be a common situation where people just believe social perspectives of certain persons without verifications and even at times when they are not real. However, to give benefit of doubt to all the immediate circumstances that gave rise to post-truth, one could say that it was long in the making as this statement attributed to Elliot in 1920 indicates:

When there is so much to be known, when there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when

⁵ Glanzberg M. (2018).

⁶ Rider, S. & Peters, M. A. (2018). "Post-truth, fake news: Viral modernity and higher education" in Peters, M. A., Rider, S., Hyvonen, M., & Besley, T. (Ed). *Post-truth, fake news: Viral modernity and higher education* Singapore: Springer, pp. 3-12

⁷ Orwell, G. quoted in McIntyre, Lee (2018). *Post-Truth*, London: The MIT Press, p. 1.

⁸ McIntyre, L. *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹ Boorstin, Daniel quoted in Ralph Keyes (2011). *The Post-truth era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*, New York: St Martin's Press.

everyone knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not. And when we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts.¹⁰

Thus, over a long period, sensationalism and believability crept in to replace truth; and as such, objective truth began to decline, and got to its lowest point in 2016. Of course, this declining truth has adversely affected human activities including efforts to control the spread of Covid-19. Truth has become relative to the point that a lot of people do not know who to believe again, or what to accept as truth. This has adversely affected risk communication during Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Truth and media objectivity anchored on gate keeping theory

Truth and objectivity are sine qua non in communication. They are imperatives in journalism. According to Julian Baggini truth and objectivity are “coherent ideas and for the journalist, proper ideals”.¹¹ To be coherent is to be consistent, clear and articulate. To be objective is to be fair, impartial, and not give room for subjective interpretations in media reporting. That is why truth and objectivity are ideals for the media. Media should be in pursuit of truth. Each media coverage should be a service to truth and objectivity. Objectivity in media coverage hinges on accurate reporting of facts as they are.

Over the years, journalists have tried to tell the truth and to be objective. Media houses have always sought after objectivity in news coverage, but in spite of the determination to keep up with this practice, it has constantly been elusive. It has become more and more challenging to have objectivity in media reporting. Pointing out these challenges, Judith Lichtenberg says “We are told by some that journalism isn’t objective; by others that it cannot be objective; and by still others that it shouldn’t be objective”.¹² Thus, these challenges range from not being objective to inability to be objective and to obligation not to be objective. Consequently, her illustration is similar to that of Christiana Lefevre-Gonzalez that compares media objectivity to nonpartisanship; and holds true objectivity as an impossibility while nonpartisanship as possibility.¹³ This is to say that it is easier for journalists to be nonpartisanship than to be objective. Be that as it may, according to Steven Maras, the whole gamut on the edifice of media objectivity is built not on the naivety of an existence of human objectivity, but upon the realization that humans are not objective. It then became imperative to the media since the 1920s to seek out measures of journalistic investigations that guarantee scientific verifications and objectivity.¹⁴ Thus, it is an imperative for media to be objective and search after truth.

Media objectivity can only be anchored on the gate keeping theory for more effective coverage. Gate keeping theory of the media was proposed by Kurt Lewin by 1947. This theory upholds the role of the media in selection of newsworthy materials and rejection of non-newsworthy materials. According to Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017), it was

¹⁰ Quoted in Block, David (2019). *Post-Truth and Political Discourse*, Spain: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 20.

¹¹ Quoted in Steve Maras (2013). *Objectivity in Journalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 104.

¹² Judith Lichtenberg, quoted in Steven Maras, *ibid*, p. 105.

¹³ Christiana Lefevre-Gonzalez (2013), *Revising the Rulebook, Revamping an Industry: Objectivity and Professional Journalism in Transition in the Modern Media Ecology*. Colorado: University of Colorado, p. 5.

¹⁴ Steven Maras, *ibid.*, p. 106.

White D. M. that introduced this theory to communication. Gate keeping theory is the process by which journalists decide on what to be made to the public and what not to be let out to the public.¹⁵ As the term indicates, the media play this role of gate keeping determine what their audience get to know from the torrential flow of information. As Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwa-Uwaoma point out, applicability of this theory is in situations of conflict between government and media, situations of political biases, and other social pressures.¹⁶ Covid-19 risk communication witnessed mirages of conflicting information about the way forward in the fight against Covid-19. As it were, media houses lost grip on their gate keep role.

3. Risk Communication of COVID-19

Life itself, they say, is a risk. If one does not take risks, possibly one may find it difficult to live life because life is a risk. On the other hand, to live life, one cannot but communicate. In other words, it is not out of place to talk about risk communication. Risk communication is basically how people can communicate at moments of risks. According to Lundgren & McMakin "risk communication encompasses many types of messages and processes. It is the poster warning food workers to handle food safely to prevent the spread of *Escherichia coli* bacteria. It is the emergency response worker rallying a community to evacuate in the middle of the rising flood".¹⁷ When there is fire outbreak and people's lives are in danger, the risk communicator does not just come and whisper that there is fire outbreak; no, he shouts it. This shows that modality of risk communication is important. Likewise, channels of risk communication are of importance to both risk communicator and the community.

In undertaking risk communication, the media aims at educating the people; helping them to apply necessary control to avert danger; to foster legitimate trust amongst the people; to achieve better organizational setting and decision-making exercise; and to make the people comport themselves to listen to important safety information being given to avert danger.¹⁸ As stated above, life is a risk, and as such everyone takes risks at some point in life, and everyone is vulnerable to risky conditions. As Sellnow, Ulmer, Seeger & Littlefield (2009) state, people in families, governments, artisans, technologists, scientists, and in fact, people from all walks of life could be exposed to risks. Covid-19 risk communication engaged virtually every segment of Nigerian society and beyond through the media. Principally, government and private media organs, health organizations and facilities, state governments and federal government were all involved in Covid-19 risk communications. The immediate content of all risk communications undertaken by these bodies were about eminent dangers of Covid-19, how deadly it was, and necessary precautions needed avert such dangers.

Unfortunately, most of Covid-19 risk communications were caught under crossfire. Some of the risk communications that came under crossfire include:

1. Covid-19 is an emergency health situation or pandemic.
2. Wearing of masks.

¹⁵ Ezekiel S. Asemah, Angela N. Nwammuo & Adeline O. A. Nkwa-Uwaoma (2017). *Theories and Models of Communication*, Jos: Matkol Press, p. 160.

¹⁶ Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwa-Uwaoma, *ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁷ Lundgren, R. E. & McMakin, A. H. (2018). *Risk communication: A handbook for communicating environmental, safety, and health risks*, 6th Ed. New Jersey: IEEE Press, p. 9.

¹⁸ Sellnow, T.L., Ulmer, R.R., Seeger, M.W. and Littlefield, R.S. (2009). *Effective Risk Communication: A Message-Centered Approach*. New York, NY, USA: Springer.

3. Meaning and extent of lockdown.
4. Use of hydroxychloroquine and bleach as treatment for Covid-19.
5. Symptomatic and asymptomatic transmission of Covid-19.
6. Struggle of preference between permitting economic activities while religious activities were on hold.
7. Issues about vaccination – type, safety, and several others.

Unfortunately, the above listed issues were caught under crossfire. Some of them were bad information that were communicated, others were good information that got misconstrued in the media. For ulterior motives of remaining in power, some politicians were generating wrong information on those issues through the media. Apparently, a good number of media houses failed in their gate keeping role in controlling outflow of information to their audience. That left a lot of people stranded on what to accept as truth from the media and what not to accept as truth; and in the process, a good number of persons contracted Covid-19, or took wrong approach to prevention and treatment of the deadly disease.

4. Politics of Covid-19 in Nigeria

It was Aristotle who popularized the idea that man is a political animal. Of course, politics contours all human activities amongst his fellow men. Man is able to bring order and procedure into the world because of his political prowess. Man's communication ability has constantly enhanced his procedure for decision-making and policymaking which are roles he plays as a political being.¹⁹ Politics of Covid-19 could be seen in government's decision making and policy generation exercises across the world.

Prior to the outbreak of the disease in Nigeria, the government was comparatively lax in terms of disease prevention and control in the country. It appeared as if the country and indeed, Nigerians were insulated from contracting the deadly disease. But the first index case prompted extreme steps to control the transmission of the disease (Federal Ministry of Health, 2020). There was rapid activation of the National Emergency Operations Centre in the country in coordination with the multi-sectoral Corona Virus Preparedness Community. This group was headed by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). There were lots of measures like closure of borders, lockdowns, restrictions of movements, activities, among non-pharmaceutical measures to limit the scourge of the virus.

Notwithstanding the above enumerated coordination by governments and their agencies, bad politics came to play. For instance, some government officials had contrary views over generally acceptable ones on how to prevent spread of the disease. There were also conflicts of interests in distribution of palliatives. There were as well, several interpretations of applicability of non-pharmaceutical procedures as prevention measures. A good number of state governments in Nigeria were not sincere with their citizens about the disease as they denied existence of the disease in their states. All those lapses made monitoring and handling of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria to be the inefficient risk coordination element of political communication. From that perspective, one could understand that much of government's correspondence was about grapevine communication, where the communication was purely fake and was geared towards supporting ulterior motives of government personnel and not

¹⁹ Árvai, J. & Rivers, L. (2014). *Effective Risk Communication*. London, UK, Routledge.

so much about protecting interests of the people. That portrayed the politics of Covid-19 in Nigeria in bad light.

Be that as it may, Philip Y. Lipsky views politics of Covid-19 pandemic era across the world as politics of crisis. According to him during the pandemic, the stakes were high for government officials in terms of decision making and policy guidance. He sees government officials as being forced to provide urgent decisions while their citizenry battled the pandemic. Decision-making exercises were “under conditions of threat, uncertainty, and time pressure”.²⁰ While his position could be a general alibi for many a politician, there were several others whom posterity would hold accountable for their misconduct, misinformation, and wrong governance during the pandemic.

5. Transparency and openness in Covid-19 risk communication

Clarity is one of the key characteristics of risk communication in the management of crises.²¹ Besides making facts clearer, making them softer and less fearful are amongst what make risk communication efficient. Transparency and honesty in risk communication have often been shown to be difficult to achieve, but good managers handle risk communication efficiently by incorporating transparency and openness in such a manner that the presentation of the communication does not sound painful to the recipients.²² This is primarily achieved by applying skillful actions in handling the feelings of the addressees. Where communication needs of the target audience are the primary concerns of the risk communicator, transparency and openness are their likely accompaniment. From assessments, federal government’s apex body in coordination of Covid-19 – the Presidential Task Force (PTF) has been on track in efforts to promote transparency and openness in risk communications. According to the News Agency of Nigeria, the PTF on Covid-19 has made concerted efforts to maintain transparency and openness in its risk communication.²³ For instance, the PTF developed a couple of online display dashboards sites wherein citizens could track its activities, reports, policies and coordination.

Though there were a couple controversial issues, it was the #EndSARS protests discoveries that shocked Nigerians. The violence of the #EndSARS protests revealed across the country that palliative relief products had been locked up by several government departments without releasing those items to the public to alleviate the crushing effects of the economic lock-down on the populace. The government authorities had earlier communicated that the palliatives have been distributed to the suffering masses whereas they were not distributed. This deceptive correspondence has helped to deteriorate public compliance with the Covid-19 protocol in Nigeria. It goes to showcase that government was not forthright about pandemic management, safety and provisions of palliatives for the people.

²⁰ Philip Y. Lipsky (2020). “Covid-19 and the politics of crises” *International Organization*, No. 74 Supplement, p. 99.

²¹ Liwei, Z., Huijie, L. and Kelin, C. (2020). Effective Risk Communication for Public Health Emergency: Reflection on the COVID-19 (2019-nCoV) Outbreak in Wuhan, China. *Journal of healthcare* 8, 64.

²² Liwei, Huijie & Kelin, *ibid*.

²³ News Agency of Nigeria (2020). *The Guardian*, 14th October 2020.

6. Loopholes in risk communication of Covid-19 in Nigeria

Evaluating the risk communications undertaken by governments, their agencies and media houses, the following are the loopholes that are noticeable in their communicative mechanism:

Government risk communication built so much on online communications using Twitter, Facebook, and other elitist networks, whereas they know that majority of Nigerians live in rural areas with little or no use of electrical appliances or equipment to allow the use of the above described media. Such approaches to risk communication, often tend to escalate the pandemic's weak compliances to regulations and safety measures.

The pandemic's management protocol should have established sufficient grassroots mobilization in remote villages. Bottom-top solution should have been used in conventional approaches, including use of churches, mosques, and traditional rulers, to help majority of Nigerians grasp risk communication of Covid-19 pandemic firsthand. More rural people would have been involved in door to door circulation of information about the dangers of Covid-19, and by so doing, foster compliance. More and more Nigerians would have been more Covid-19 complaint than was the case during the pandemic.

Coalition Against COVID-19 is a private sector vehicle for mobilization of funds and palliatives to support government efforts to fight crunching effects of Covid-19 due the compulsory lockdown of the economy. Though this public sector fund mobilization group has raised up to ₦1.5 trillion naira, it is difficult tracking the disbursement of these funds. Again, this has its adverse effects in compliance to Covid-19 regulations.

Some elected public officials were interested in remaining in power, while they felt challenged by the portents the pandemic, they did little to combat it, yet they thought they could just wish it away, and it would be gone. In their desperation, such government officials were making wrong claims of the pandemic; they were saying things that were not scientifically verifiable, yet such claims were carried on regular media houses. In so doing, such media houses marred risk communications of Covid-19. They provided wrong panacea to the spread of information, and therefore, added to the incredulity of Nigerians about the disease whereas the pandemic claimed lives.

7. Recommendations and conclusion

There is no doubt that effective risk communication could provide real panacea in the management and control of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Covid-19 risk communication in Nigeria was muddled up in lies, selfish interests, insincerity, deceptions, and misinformation to say the least. The following recommendations are imperatives for an appropriate risk communication:

1. Government bodies, and media organizations involved in risk communications should endeavour to constantly search for truth in their reportage. Relativism of truth and lack of objectivity are inimical to the existence of a civil society. The media must provide appropriate service to truth.
2. For an effective risk communication in pandemic situations where most Nigerians do not have adequate access to the internet, appropriate traditional means of communication that involved face to face mobilization of people at the grassroots

should be incorporated into risk communication strategy. Though spread modality of Covid-19 was more in urban areas, rural areas should not have been abandoned.

3. Media practitioners must continue to commit to the truth, objectivity in reportage, and adequate gate keeping policies to guarantee better information flow to their audience. They should constantly eschew political influences in their coverage of pandemic situations especially in the face of political forces interested only on retention of power and never service to the people.
4. To elicit trust from their audience, media houses should be consistent with truthful spread of risk communication on the pandemic. A situation where their audience feel that media houses are talking from both sides of their mouth, would surely lead to incredulity. Once, there is distrust, appropriate communication cannot take place.
5. On their own part, media users should endeavour to decipher the truth from the flurry of information they receive from the media. Living in a post-truth era is an enormous challenge for personal conscience formation. One should not leave such sensitive part of one's life to be determined by neither the government nor the media.
6. The need for adequate media literacy campaign cannot be overemphasized. In a world inundated information as is the case today in an internet savvy world, media users should endeavour to be informed users. Media literacy should be of paramount interests of all media users.

In conclusion therefore, for an effective risk communication in pandemic situations especially in a post-truth era, the kind the world is facing today, where incredulity is already in the air, both the Nigerian government and media houses should endeavour to create enabling environment for effective risk communications. Clarity of purpose and message should govern risk communication in situations where people are endangered by life threatening diseases that spreads without discriminations as Covid-19 spread. Openness and transparency are values with which risk communications in pandemic situations should be directed daily for efficiency and effectiveness in averting looming danger. Over and above the foregoing, accountability should not be thrown to the wind in a bid for an effective risk communication. Risk communicators should be accountable to people or audience. Accountability engenders success.

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