Covid-19 Media Discourse and Public Perception: The Local Construction of a Social Threat in Cameroon

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Introduction

Media discourse has been at the core of Mass Communication a form of human communication practice on how they talk to one another through non-verbal means, which concerns messages transmitted a medium to reach a large number of people (Devito, 2011). Though the World Health Organization no longer considers the COVID-19 pandemic a global health emergency, it does not mean that it is not a global health threat anymore which is why the media in its discourses should prioritize by finding creative ways to communicate about it.

According to Aurora (2023), analysing and discussing datasets can provide journalists within the media landscape with more than just infection or casualty numbers. In addition to cases and deaths, they can revisit vaccination efforts or travel restrictions and what's resulted from them. To him, open data sources, such as Our World in Data, can be useful for finding many different figures. By searching for "coronavirus," reporters can access customized, downloadable data to further analyse. Data can help journalists identify trends, provide context and point toward gaps in coverage, especially when looking at data specific to a country or region

Therefore, going beyond Covid-19 discourse reporting entails keeping in mind other major impacts that COVID-19 has had on global health. As countries prioritized their responses to the pandemic, other health issues may have emerged. Thus, identifying specific issues that were exacerbated during COVID-19, such as domestic violence and unemployment, is another avenue for reporting (Ibid, 2023).

For a clear perspective on issues concerning mass media effects, it is useful to illuminate what constitute mass media in current communication studies; that is any communication channel used to simultaneously reach a large number of people, including radio, TV, newspapers, and Internet. (Wimmer & Dominick, 2012). In this regard, the media play a major role in the social construction of risks (Carignan, 2014) with studies highlighting the relevance of considering communication for risk management during epidemics (Bazouche and Bousta, 2016).

The consequences media discourses have constructing a social or societal threat cannot be overemphasized. This is because the media has been used by many institutions, individuals during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most often, the societal threats are more challenging to reassure those who are worried than to convince people and stakeholders of the risk they are exposed to (Regan, 2016; Johnson, 2017). Widespread fear develops from a complex interplay of social factors, one of them being the mainstream and social media that shape people's psychosocial and behavioural response to what is presented as significant threats (Pappas, 2009).

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed the outburst of a new coronavirus in China. Two months later, 11th March 2020, it declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

This study finds it relevant to examine public awareness, while looking at their perceptions from a media discourse perspective and its ability to apparently cause a societal threat in Cameroon due to media discourse communication. Several studies have assessed these impacts, showing how among others, media newsroom and program decisions have strongly accelerated their review editorial processes for Covid-19 content during the pandemic. This has raised questions regarding the quality of media discourse on the virus. However, there has been very little research carried out on the response of the public to outbreaks of diseases in terms of how they perceive the media treatment of the pandemic in Cameroon.

Despite the rising popularity of media discourse during the course of the pandemic, the real effects on public reaction, risk perception, and protection measures have not been thoroughly investigated within the Cameroonian. Although epidemics' distinctiveness is improbability within a society, some people do not always obey the new rules and instructions and refuse to sustain preventive actions from media messages. This study is important because it is coming at a time COVID-19 has changed many aspects of how health reporting is communicated.

At the level of literature gap, not enough studies have been carried on COVID-19 from a communication perspective in Cameroon. Thus, the absence in local literature no doubt constitutes to the essence of investigating this problem. In is worth noting that the normative role of the media is to share information of consequence with the public. For this reason, the current study's applicable literature and theoretical frameworks that can be used to understand the reason behind this study on Covid-19 Media Discourse and Public Perception in Cameroon.

Literature Review

Weber and KRC Research (2020) in a survey conducted among 1,004 Americans of 18 years and above, sort to find out how people feel regarding Covid-19 pandemic precautions, with the survey conducted online, demographically representing the adult population in the US. Findings revealed that more than half (55%) agreed coronavirus fears were overblown, 41% disagreed, while 4% were not sure. Additionally, younger people (18-44) were more likely to feel fears are overblown. Least likely to feel fears are overblown are people who feel at risk (39%) and seniors (65 years and older, 44%). Overall, 32% say they feel at risk for the coronavirus. Six percent (6%) of them held that they knew someone who had the virus.

Most of the respondents said they know what government officials and authorities are doing (86% very or somewhat informed, 46% very). 70% are regularly washing hands and avoiding touching their face or surfaces, 67% are staying home as much as possible and avoiding groups 76% 55 and older; and 75% Baby Boomers, 55% are practicing "social distancing," 41% have stocked upon groceries and other essential items, 28% have cancelled or postponed personal travel 35% of those employed, and 31% of the employed say they are working from home (Weber, 2020).

Moreover, other results indicated that 79% are confident (33% very) that U.S. medical and healthcare facilities were capable of handling the outbreak of the coronavirus up from 75% in two weeks. 70% are confident (27% very) in local schools can handle an outbreak up from 48% in two weeks. 63% are confident (22% very) in businesses to handle an outbreak. Also, 73% of employees are confident (34% very) their employer can handle an outbreak up from 60% in two weeks. The confidence level was much greater (81%) among people who have received information from their employer (Ibid, 2020).

According to APCO World Wide (2020), 9 in 10 of American adults view coronavirus as serious with more than a third (38%) calling it extremely serious and more than a quarter (29%) very serious. Findings equally indicated that employees are worried about getting coronavirus by a 3:2 margin, with (60% worried, 40% not), and a quarter (24%) are extremely worried. In another perspective, 76% see coronavirus as extremely serious while 58% see it as least serious.

The media play a major role in the social construction of risks (Carignan, 2014). Numerous studies have highlighted the relevance of considering communication for risk management during outbreaks and epidemics (Bazouche and Bousta, 2016; Grenier, 2019). Widespread fear develops from a complex interplay of social factors, one of them being the mainstream and social media that shape people's psychosocial and behavioral response to what is presented as significant threats (Pappas, 2009).

Mainstream media reports do not often communicate science effectively, and this may largely contribute to public misinformation, misunderstanding, fear and maladaptive responses (Lancet, 2014). Typically, messages conveyed by these media tend to report death tolls and growing number of cases, instead of focusing on messages issued by official authorities, such as PHB to adopt. The era of social media adds another layer to the complex processes through which misinformation, social norms and risk perceptions diffuse across populations (Neely and Nading, 2017; Wang et al., 2019) and the inter-influences of stakeholders.

Distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate information has become more challenging. Information gaps can therefore be readily filled with rumours and myths, which can contribute to further marginalization of populations (which is currently the case with Asian populations during COVID-19; Chung & Li, 2020).

According to Italian Institute for International Political Studies, ISPI (2020), another societal threat using the media to communicate was the adoption of lockdown measures aiming at curbing the spread of the coronavirus pandemic had profound socio-economic implications across the continent. Containment is hardly consistent with African societies' organization, where **informality** is the rule. In sub-Saharan Africa, 55% of the population lives in informal settlements, such as slums or shantytowns. The informal economy allegedly accounts for about 40% of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that "informal employment is the main source of employment in Africa", accounting for 86% of all employment, 71.9 % when excluding agriculture and 89% in sub-Saharan Africa. A structural characteristic of the informal economy is self-employment in precarious situations. Generally speaking, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted on Africa's labour market, leading to a sharp increase in underemployment.

As a feature typical of African societies and productive systems, ISPI (2020), held that informality exposed and keeps exposing the populations of the continent to serious vulnerability. Forced to comply with lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the virus, households that are dependent on unprotected informal wages are at risk of losing their income sources and running out of livelihoods. This will lead to an increase in social inequalities, exacerbating insecurity, and deteriorating the economic conditions of individuals and communities faced with the dramatic choice of either starving or getting sick. Curfews and border restrictions have disrupted supply chains, trade activities and agricultural production, constrained transport to markets, reduced the availability of basic food items and exacerbated price increases, leaving poor people struggling to access food.

The social impact of the pandemic and its economic consequences in Africa pose a serious risk of sliding back in terms of development. As stressed by the African Development Bank, the COVID-19 crisis "could move the continent further from the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating extreme poverty". In order to mitigate this risk, it is paramount for African governments to provide adequate assistance to food-insecure households and invest their financial resources in strengthening social security measures and alleviating the effects of the current dramatic and multidimensional crisis on the most vulnerable ISPI (2020).

Social media platforms have responded to a majority of the social media posts rated false in our sample.

According to Vraga and Bode (2020), there is no directly comparable data available, but background conversations with fact-checkers suggest COVID-19-related misinformation is more likely to be actioned by platforms than, for example, political misinformation. If this is so, it may reflect the combination of the clear and present danger of the pandemic, less partisan disagreement, and the fact that there is expertise and evidence to determine more clearly what is false and what is not than is the case in many political discussions.

Based on him, while describing the landscape of COVID-19 misinformation as an 'infodemic' captures the scale, our analysis suggests it risks mischaracterizing the nature of the problems we face. As we have shown, there is wide variety in the types of misinformation circulating, the claims made concerning the virus, and motivations behind its production. Unlike the pandemic itself, there is no single root cause behind the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus. Instead, COVID-19 appears to be supplying the opportunity for very different actors with a range of different motivations and goals to produce a variety of types of misinformation about many different topics.

Going by Scott Brennen Felix M. Simon, Philip N. Howard Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2020) study through a systematic analysis of a corpus of 225 pieces of misinformation about the new coronavirus rated false or misleading by international fact-checking organisations. Fact- checks were sampled from a corpus of 2,871 articles provided to the authors by First Draft that consolidates virus-related fact-checks from the Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network database and Google's Fact Check Explorer tool between January and March 2020.

Brennen et al (2020) did a sample of 18% of articles was drawn at random from the remaining corpus (N=1253) and a secondary sample of an additional 20% was drawn at random. Duplicate articles and those that had a 'true' rating in the primary sample were replaced from the secondary sample. Importantly, no articles from 31 March 2020 were included in the corpus. The % increase in fact-checks between March and January quoted in the factsheet may be slightly under-estimated.

At the level of the theoretical framework, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory developed and refined by Coombs, 1995 comprise of three elements: the crisis situation, crisis response strategies, and a system for matching the crisis situation with the crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2008). This theory is important because it reminds institutions to prioritise public opinion than its own needs when responding to a crisis (Covid-19.

Just as in any organisational action, the focus here is on employee or public success, not the organisations;. This is because what stakeholders want to hear is what is going to make them trust the organisation again. This therefore entails institutions putting aside their ego and taking responsibility for their actions, while hoping that their honesty will regain their public loyalty. Thus, within the framework of this study, employee perceptions about COVID-19 and how employers respond towards the crisis demonstrates the way the pandemic can or has been handled

within institutions. Perceptions usually help institutions understand the level of trust and satisfaction employees have in handling a crisis that has to do with their safety and that of the society.

Notwithstanding, the Crisis Decision Theory (CDT) by Sweeny (2008) in this study helps to structure and interpret this research by offering a straightforward framework through which to understand the decision making process in an institution. The theory links existing theories on stress and coping with decision research to describe the cognitive processes used by individuals to respond to a crisis event. This theory combines the strengths of coping theories with research on decision making to predict the responses people choose under negative circumstances. The theory integrates literatures on coping, health behaviour, and decision making, among others, into 3 stages that describe the process of responding to negative events. This includes; assessing the severity of the negative event, determining response options, and evaluating response options. Sweeney reviews and organizes the relevant research on factors that shape information processing at each stage and that ultimately predict decisions in the face of negative events.

Methodology

According to Creswell (2014), the quantitative research design in this study is an inquiry that provides a specific direction for procedures in a research scheme. The method used for any scientific work involves the roles of interpretation and criteria for acceptable explanations as well as research designs, data collection techniques and data processing routines that have been deduced from these benchmarks. At the level of methods, a survey with the use of questionnaires was employed while the qualitative section used the semi structured interview.

The population of the study is made up of medical students from the faculty of Health Sciences, University of Yaoundé I stratified across the two different levels of study. The categories chosen were thought to have a comprehensive knowledge of Covid-19 and the discourse surrounding it in Cameroon. The study therefore makes use of non- probability sampling (quota sampling). The main reason directing quota sampling is the researcher's ease of access to the sample population. At the level of size, a total of 488 was the total population. However, going by the derived sample size, data collection was conducted by sampling a total of 215 health science students for the quantitative section, and 25 decision editors of the media industry for qualitative.

Findings

Table 1: Understanding the extent to which Covid-19 media discourse contributed to the local construction of a social threat in Cameroon.

Terms	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	50	23.3%
Agree	92	48.8%
Neutral	14	6.5%
Disagree	17	7.9%
Strongly disagree	42	19.5%
TOTAL	215	100%

Source: Researcher's field studies (2023)

Table1 above shows that ninety two (92) respondents, representing 48.8% agreed that Covid-19 media discourse through media messages about the pandemic constituted a social threat in Cameroon. Fifty (50) respondents, constituting 23.3% strongly agree respectively that Covid-19 media discourse contributed enormously to social threat in Cameroon during the pandemic. Additionally, fourteen (14) respondents, translating to 6.5% said that they were neutral as to whether covid-19 media discourse through media messages caused a social threat in Cameroon during the outbreak of the pandemic. It is worth noting that seventeen (17) respondents, representing 7.9% said disagreed to the notion that covid-19 media discourse constituted to posing a social threat in Cameroon. In the same line, forty two (42) respondents, forming 19.5% said they strongly disagree that media discourse messages did pose a social threat in the country.

Table 2: Aspect of societal threat affected Covid-19 media discourse in Cameroon

Terms	Frequency	Percentage
limit to communal physical life	83	38.6%
Entertainment and leisure	62	28.8%
Mental health due to home stay	37	17.2%
Poverty and food security	33	15.3%
Total	215	100.0%

Source: Author's field work (2023)

The table 2 above indicates that Eighty-six (86) being 38.6% of the respondents believed that the major factor of Covid-19 media discourse which caused a social threat to Cameroon was the fact that it limited the communal physical life that used to exist before. Sixty two (62) respondents, representing 28.8% believed that the social threat caused by Covid-19 media discourse was that of the threat on the entertainment and leisure sector of the society. Furthermore, thirty seven (37) respondents, constituting 17.2% considered the mental health component due to the stay at home media messages as another social threat Covid-19 media discourse brought to Cameroon. Finally thirty three (33) respondents, which are 15.3%, said social threat aspect in the society caused by Covid-19 media discourse was that it led to increase poverty and food security.

Discussion of findings

In this study, the researcher maps out public perceptions of COVID-19 media discourse and its ability to constitute a social threat in Cameroon. Across the world, there has been a diverse reaction as to the extent to which the pandemic has been blown out, with many cases resulting to conspiracies with a negative balance sheet in developing countries like Cameroon.

Consistent with the literature in the domain of Public perception on Covid-19 media discourse and its ability to cause a social threat due to the overblown nature by the media, findings share a clear view about the virus in relation to how the media covered it from a public perspective.

According to findings from the study, majority of the respondents feel that Covid-19 media discourse contributed in constructing a local social threat in Cameroon due to it being over overblown nature by the mass media. This better explains why the social aspect affected by media discourse was in the domain of isolation, limiting communal and physical connections and destroying social amenities like entertainment areas and churches from functioning orderly.

Results tally with literature and the work of Weber and KRC Research (2020), whose findings revealed that more than half of respondents wholly agree that media coverage of coronavirus was overblown which resulted in exhibiting an atmosphere of fear in the society. Additionally, while some respondents opined that they do not feel at risk in contracting the virus due to media content, there is a sharp contrast in the study with majority opining that media discourse and its conspiracies contributed in creating a social threat ranging from misinformation throughout the media.

The findings equally align with the study conducted by APCO World Wide (2020) as identified in a review of 9 in 10 of respondents sampled. This sampled population viewed coronavirus as serious. Thus, indicating that those sampled were worried about getting the virus due to media coverage. In essence, just like the outcome of this study on Covid-19, the public viewed coronavirus as being serious with media coverage contributing in destabilising the social setup in the society rather than advocating for issues like vaccine rollout and vaccination proper.

Corroborating quantitative discussions, journalism Editors' perceptions from the rigorousness of Covid-19 media discourse as a harmful social threat in Cameroon was put into perspective. In-line with the findings, 25 journalists conversationally enunciated themselves in a vulnerable position in the COVID-19 pandemic era. They saw the pandemic as an undecorated virus at conception that was capable of endangering the landscape of journalism practice, capable of causing a societal threat as result of pressure from access to sources as well as market forces. This put at risk journalists' aptitude to fulfill their responsibility to society. Therefore, in the course of reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists have the daunting task of gathering and distributing accurate information.

It should be noted that 25 Participants in the findings assessed the ruthlessness of the crisis by drawing on a variety of information that affected their response as media agenda setters in the society. The COVID-19 as a pandemic was recognized by participants as a epidemic which took Cameroon unprepared.

According to interviewees, the first few weeks of the pandemic were characterized by a significant period of uncertainty about the virus and the lack of knowledge from media decision makers in the sector. This to them led to a lot of misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories about the virus, many of which were promoted by the media landscape.

According to majority of the editors, information was not frequently released to the public through the media as the vehicle. This made uncertainty to persist over time and made the media a tool of speculation with a long term harmful effect on the health sector: "I can say clearly without any doubts that the lack of knowledge on the part of journalists contributed to the severe nature of the virus and to the low level vaccine penetration in the country. The media and the government updates were more political than health wise.

However, majority of editors opined that that they did not think anybody expected the virus to be as big as it turned to be. Months into the pandemic, journalists wrestled with uncertainty as new waves of COVID-19 increased, while public understanding of the disease shifted. Thus, interviewees believed that the pandemic had disrupted their work realities and personal responsibilities.

Journalism professionals explained that the pandemic was a broader crisis in the country. They equally added that their inability to master and use the media at the early stages for proper health awareness contributed to the social realities in the society. To them, it was a crisis on the entire country and a crisis on their part because they were not able to adapt at the early stage by better understanding the pandemic. Participants designated multiple predicted consequences of the pandemic. In general, their dominant concern was how the media could handle this pandemic which was new and unexpected, and how to educate the people on how to contract or prevent COVID-19.

The severity of this virus often triggered the crisis decision-making process within editors on what to write, and or talk within their respective media platforms: From the findings, it was strange living a life of isolation, physical distancing, face masking, and washing of hands every time. Thus, if journalists felt this way, helping the society was definitely going to be an overwhelming task.

The public health measures adopted to reduce the spread of COVID-19 led to additional consequences and further amplified uncertainties surrounding the virus. For example, isolation restrictions whereby care partners were prohibited from entering certain places. A according to editors, it was extremely demanding, and the government through the media was trying to figure out what was going on and how to adapt to the new realities.

Thus, majority of the editors did explain the complex nature of covering crisis and trauma while also experiencing the same themselves. This applied to local journalists who are residents and stakeholders in the communities in which they work. News work resembles the work of science. Journalists have a responsibility to be fact checkers and information transmitters for the public. Thus, participants who were both traditional and online Journalists used professional, unprofessional, and personal means to contribute to the COVID-19 communication ecology.

In a research commentary released in the early stages of the pandemic, Lewis (2020) argued that COVID-19 did not solely add new issues for journalists to work through but also compounded existing issues and enlarged the blind spots in their work. In particular, Lewis (2020) explained that journalism research tends to underplay some aspects of their lived experiences.

In interviews, journalists style their responsibility to share information that might help readers save their lives and the lives of others. For the majority of Print, TV and online based journalists, the challenges of reporting in the pandemic focused on providing adequate coverage for the community despite a lack of prior experience of reporting in a crisis. They therefore discussed talked about the personal concerns they had for the public and how those concerns affected their decision to discuss and what to discuss in their reporting.

Editors explained how they, in every sense of the phrase were thrown into the intensity and only managed to do what they by working through it. To TV /online editors, since April 2020, the tone of the stories written had shifted to focus on the future: How will restaurants and bars reopen? How will football get the fans back, how will churches operate? How do we stay safe as we go out more? Breaking news come every week, and almost every day, whether that's new case numbers, new developments in what there were seeing plus changes in policy Therefore, before this outbreak,

they had little or no knowledge or experience in crisis communication or how to respond to a health crisis.

Conclusion

At this point in time, it is important to know that based on the study perception COVID-19 media discourse contributed significantly to the construction of a social threat within the period of the pandemic in Cameroon. While the media is expected to play its educative role, the outcome of the study reveals that the social threat was evident in by its ability to limit communal physical life, affect the entertainment and leisure industry, mental health due to home stay, and an influence on Poverty and food security.

Policy is at the center of every nation. In this regard, the study recommends that the Cameroon government develop a cohesive health and crisis communication prototype, with crisis communication plan that anticipates a crisis for the nation.

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