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The “Eboliticization” of Discourse: Online Legitimations on the Outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in West Africa

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Abstract

Working within the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and insights from Stanley Cohen’s sociological concept of Moral Panic (MP), this study examined the motivations behind some of the online reactions to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. News of the outbreak of the dreaded disease in some countries like Nigeria and the United States caused a great deal of fear and panic in public sphere and widened the personal/social spaces between individuals and altered traditional patterns of social behaviour. The space and the freedom provided by the internet enabled participants to express their sentiments and biases – all in reaction to the Ebola disease. It was discovered that public discourse on the disease did not tilt towards the medical but were political, racial and religious in the main.

Introduction

We use the term “eboliticization” to describe the various ideologically mediated discourses constructed by individuals and groups (local and international) in reaction to the outbreak of the Ebola virus disease (EVD) in West Africa. The outbreak

of the dreaded disease in some West African countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria in 2014 elicited apprehensive reactions from within and outside the region and the continent. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the contagious disease, which currently neither has certified drugs for treatment nor vaccine (every other drug in use now is experimental) has claimed over 7000 lives (*The Punch*), with several others under threat of being infected if the spread of the disease is not contained. The situation attracted massive and contradictory media hype on the fatality of the disease, casualty figures, symptoms, preventive measures, etc. The resources of the internet also provided veritable platforms for both consciousness raising and expression of anxiety, sentiments and biases about the disease.

A critical examination of the discourse texts reveals that most of these reactions were ideologically motivated. While some were “expert” opinions by medical professionals and political leaders reassuring the public of their safety and giving the impression that they (the professionals/authorities) possess the technical and political competence to arrest the situation; some were extremely political – accusing political leadership of insensitivity and ethno-religious bias. Some participants expressed lack of confidence in human leadership by taking the matter to divine court. The most extreme reactions were those that frame people like the late Patrick Sawyer (the index case in Nigeria) as a terrorist sponsored by international terrorist network like Al-Qaeda or Boko Haram to destroy the innocent. As a result, they frame victims of the disease (particularly the health workers that contracted the disease in the course of treating patients) as martyrs /innocent victims of “folk devils”, as Cohen (1980) calls it.

The data for analysis reveal that most of the reactions were induced by the fear of what people hear and read about the disease in both traditional and new media. Some of the posts were either deliberately or ignorantly exaggerated or out rightly wrong prognoses/diagnoses/prescriptions on the issue under engagement. In all, through their reactions, participants contribute to the construction and dissemination of discourse of hyperbole and hysteria. One of the reasons why participants resort to the internet to express their views on social and political matters like the EVD phenomenon is as a result of what Brants and Voltmer (2011:1) regard as “public mistrust in the authority and political leadership.” In their study on political communication in postmodern democracy, they contend that “political actors, such as governments, political parties, and other elites of established political institutions, are losing control over the way in which politics is communicated and interpreted in public sphere” (2). The reactions of the citizens on social media in particular are partly because of their lack of confidence in “expert” opinions/authorizations, particularly those emanating from government sources. It is also as a result of poor information management on the part of those entrusted with the responsibility of disseminating such information to the public.

Some of the reactions reveal the attitude of the West to social problems that appear to be the exclusive concern of poor-third world countries. The EVD started to attract global attention and concern only when it began to threaten the global community. Thus, the imposition of (or contemplation of) travel restrictions on travellers from Ebola endemic countries was ideologically motivated. It was to widen the space and thus minimize the physical contacts between the “infected” you and the “uninfected” me; the “sick” you and the “healthy” me; the “poor” you and the “rich” me. Thus, most blacks from the West African region and other parts of Africa became potential carriers and merchants of death in the estimation of the western world. In countries like Nigeria with reported cases of the disease, the discourse of fear about the disease also widened the personal and social space between individuals and groups thereby disrupting the communal bonds that existed among the people prior to the outbreak of the disease.

Brief History of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD)

Scientists believe there are four distinguishable subtypes of the EVD. According to some reports, the EVD (named after the Ebola River in Zaire – now Democratic Republic of Congo [CDR]) first occurred in 1976 in Sudan and Zaire. It was discovered that the Ebola virus was the causative agent of major outbreaks of haemorrhagic fever in both countries. The Ebola haemorrhagic fever (EHF) first appeared in Africa between 1976-1979 and 1994. No fewer than five independent active sites of the Ebola virus transmission were identified in Cote d’Ivoire in 1994; Zaire (DRC) in 1995; Gabon 1994, 1995 and 1996. The first incident of the Ebola virus in Sudan (EBO-S) infected 284 people and recorded a mortality of 53%. A similar incident was to occur in Yambuku, Zaire (EBO-Z) a few months later and recorded a mortality of 88% of the 318 persons that were infected. The third strain of Ebola, known as Ebola Reston (EBO-R) was first identified in 1989 when infected monkeys were imported into Reston, Virginia, USA, from Mindanao in the Philippines. The last known strain of Ebola, Ebola Cote d’Ivoire (EBO-CI) was discovered in 1994 when a female ethnologist in the Tai forest of Cote d’Ivoire, performing a necropsy on a dead chimpanzee incidentally infected herself in the process and had to be transferred to Basel, Switzerland, for definitive care. The Ebola virus disease can be transferred to humans from infected animals such as monkeys, chimpanzee and bats or through body contact with the fluids of infected persons (Peters & Peters, 1999).

Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation

Linguists and social scientists have studied the discourses of politicians, the media, health professionals and other social actors on diseases and other health challenges, and their implications on public morality, social life and the economy.

Some studies have been carried out on HIV/AIDS (see Kitzinger & Peel, 2005, Graffigna & Olson, 2009, Nothnagel, 2009, Nwoye, 2008, Komolafe, 2010, Scalan, 2010, Singh, Myburgh & Lalloo, 2010); SARS (see Joye, 2010, Chiang & Duann, 2010); autism (see Solomon, 2004); menopause (see Coupland & Williams, 2002); and dementia (see Miksell, 2010). Most of these studies reveal the ideology behind the discourses of social actors regarding the conditions of victims (or sufferers) and the processes of treatment. The hysteria caused by the EVD in public sphere was similar to that caused in 2002/2003 by the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) disease in Asia and Europe. SARS like the EVD was originally an animal to human disease. Bats and civets were said to be responsible for its spread when it first occurred in the Guangdong Province of China in 2002. SARS could be contracted through close physical contact with an infected person or through contacts with the droplets of an infected person. It caused the death of 774 persons (Joye, 2010). Chiang and Duann (2007) use the theory of critical metaphor analysis (CMA) to study SARS chiefly as DISEASE IS WAR metaphor in the construction of Self and Other. Joye (2010) is a critical discourse analysis of news representation of the 2003 global SARS outbreak. The essay discusses the ideology of media representation of victims of the disease as distant others by Western media hence victims did not receive the desired response and compassion from the Western audience until it became a potential threat to some Western European countries such as Germany, France and Belgium.

The resources of the internet have broadened the space for the greater participation of individuals and groups in the discussion of issues of personal and societal interests. Aitchison and Lewis (2003, p.1) regard the space for “wider participation” as one of the unprecedented amount of changes recorded in the media industry. This is obviously more realized in the internet medium. The internet permits the projection of multiplicity of voices and ideologies; quicker access to information; and faster reaction to prevailing social matters. This explains why Gitelman and Pingree contend that “the internet has grown from a specialized, futuristic system to the network that most significantly structures how we engage daily with the world at large” (2003: xi). Van Dijk (2001) contends that the amount of access or control an individual or group has to media usage is a form of social power. According to him “...among other resources that define the power base of a group or institution, *access to or control over* public discourse and communication is an important ‘symbolic’ resource, as is the case for knowledge and information.” (p. 335). Bloor and Bloor (2007:4) posit that central to CDA is the understanding that discourse is an integral aspect of power and control. Thus, the more access one has to the media the more social power they have to sustain their ideologies, challenge or resist discourses that promote social inequalities, unfairness and injustices (See Fairclough, 1995). The space for debate, protest and resistance from a multiplicity of stakeholders that the internet

provides, according to Mautner (2005), permits the construction of social reality and tenor. She argues that “if it was not for the internet, many representations of reality and social relationships would not be articulated at all” (p. 813).

The internet is also a platform for the legitimation and enactment of social and political powers. Herring (2003) observes that asymmetries in ethnic, racial, social and gender relations are also inferable and sometimes explicitly enacted in computer-mediated discourses (CMD). Herring therefore suggests that future researches on computer-mediated communication (CMC) should express interest on how these social inequalities are enacted by the individuals, groups and communities that populate the cyberspace. Online platforms can be and are being used on a daily basis by individuals and groups to assert their identities, negotiate their identities or resist the dominance of a real or imaginary oppressive Other (See Chilwa, 2012 & 2014). As noted earlier, diverse forms of asymmetrical relations and resistance discourses are enacted in several online membership groups and communities. Van Leeuwen (2008:123) reveals that there exist some intricate interconnections between social practices and the discourses that legitimize them. Social actors, in their social practices and activities, usually use language in a manner that shows, suppresses or backgrounds their motives and actions. How social actors legitimize their actions and intentions is discursively expressed. Van Leeuwen identifies discursive construction of legitimation as consisting of *authorization*; *moral evaluation*; *rationalization*; and *mythopoesis* (106). Graham, Keen and Dowd identify four legitimation strategies in “call to arms” speeches as appeals to a “good” legitimate power source (God, the people, the nation); appeals to history or historical mythology; the construction of a thoroughly evil other (infidels, terrorists, etc); and appeals for uniting behind a legitimate power source (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 26).

The EVD is essentially in the domain of medical discourse but global responses to it motivated discourses that are political, religious and racist in orientation. Internet postings on the disease reveal real or imaginary activation of what Charteris-Black calls “culturally based schema of what constitutes sources of fear and forms of social menace” (2005, p. 24). Thus the socio-political perception of the disease as potential threat to “US” from “THEM” triggered the panic evident in the discourses on the contagious disease. Insights from Cohen’s concept of moral panic enhance our understanding of why people tried to exaggerate the fatality of the disease and the scare or panic it provoked in public spheres. Cohen (1980, p. 9) describes moral panic as when

a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the media; the

moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes visible.

The EVD phenomenon in West Africa seems to fit into the scenario constructed by Cohen for generation of moral panic. First, the disease is a “condition” that is defined as a threat to societal values and interests. Second, affected persons/carriers of the disease, like Patrick Sawyer (the index case in Nigeria) and other migrants from countries with reported cases of Ebola are perceived as threat to Nigeria and the global society. Third, the nature of the disease is exaggerated from different and conflicting perspectives by the media. Fourth, the “moral barricades” of the disease are manned by those in control of the media, religious leaders, politicians, medical/health experts and so on who “pronounce their diagnosis and solutions... “It is the divergent expert opinions, in the form of diagnosis and solutions, on the social challenges caused by the disease that generated “moral panic” in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Thus, the discourse of fear created by social reactions in online media to the EVD widened personal, social, ideological, and political spaces between individuals and groups. It also forced some less-enlightened readers or consumers of such information into adopting unconventional preventive measures like the salt and warm water, *ewedu* (a traditionally cherished and popular vegetable in Southwestern Nigeria), and bitter kola solutions. Some of the questions to be answered in this article are: How does a typically medical discourse become political? How is the ideology of Self and the Other represented in online comments on Ebola? How does the use of language on the EVD represent a form of dominance? What are the implications of negative representations of Others on intergroup relations?

Research Data and Methodology

This study is a critical discourse analysis of online comments on the outbreak of the Ebola virus disease (EVD) in some West African countries in 2014. The data were drawn from Facebook, twitter and blog interactions, and other online media and discussion forums between July-October, 2014. Out of the 208 posts (PTs) selected for discussion, only posts that best represent each of the sub-headings designated for discussion were used for the analysis. The criteria for selection include posts that express expert opinion/legitimation on the disease; posts that appeal to God as a legitimate power source; posts that appeal to ethno-religious/racist sentiments; posts that construct a thoroughly evil other, and those that make explicit and implicit appeals to political and ideological sentiments. Thus, repetitive comments were not stated here for the purposes of clarity and economy of words.

1. Appeals to Expert Authority

Speakers/writers confer legitimacy on their discourse or text by making reference to what van Leeuwen (2008, p.107) calls “expert authority.” In legitimation by reference to expert authority the speaker/writer may rely on the advice of certain professionals or experts whose claims or assertions that “a particular course of action is ‘best’ or ‘a good idea’” in the present circumstance. In some cases, the speaker/writer makes statements or utterances that depict them as experts without providing reasons as to why it should be so. Joye (2010, p. 596) observes that positive comments by experts on situations like the SARS and Ebola outbreak result “...in feelings of safety” by the readers/viewers. Expert comments may be in the form of written or spoken text or in a multimodal format. The data analysed showed that 13.46% of the discourse on Ebola expressed expert authority or legitimation. The discourse on the Ebola outbreak in West Africa enabled several individuals and groups in many online communities and forums to express different forms of expert authorization on the dreaded disease as can be seen from the texts below.

PT 6: Commenter

Experts say the virus doesn't spread like the flu or measles because it is not airborne. However, there are some indications that current strain of the Ebola virus may be mutating. Last month a warning issued by the CDC claimed that infectious Ebola materials could be spread through the air. The advisory urges airline staff to provide surgical masks to potential Ebola victims in order “to reduce the number of droplets expelled into the air by talking, sneezing, or coughing.” The CDC is also directing airline cleaning personnel to, “not use compressed air, which might spread infectious material through the air.” The CDC's concern about the Ebola virus being spread via the air is understandable in light of a 2012 experiment conducted by Canadian scientists which proved that, “the ebola virus could be transmitted by air between species.”

The speaker/writer whose major aim is to dispel the rumour or fear that the Ebola virus disease can spread by air supports his/her position by making reference to an opinion expressed by “experts”. He/she did not say who these experts are, their field of study or profession, where they said so or why they said so. The gaps in that information are deliberate. They enable the speaker/writer to implicitly doubt the credibility of the so-called “experts”. He/she disputes the position of the “experts” by making reference a more valid information - a warning that emanated “last month” from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and validated by a 2012 experiment by “Canadian scientists” that “the ebola virus disease could be transmitted by air between species.” The speaker/writer validates his/her argument by quoting both the CDC and the Canadian scientist directly. By quoting the authorities directly the

speaker/writer aims at conferring legitimacy on his/her position that the disease can be airborne if it mutates. The speaker/writer appears to be more certain, based on information from the CDC and the Canadian scientists, that “there are some indications that current strain of the ebola virus may be mutating.”

In **PT 208** below, the expert legitimation makes the expert, Physicist Alessandro Vespignani of the Northeastern University in Boston, the subject of the sentence. By thematizing the identity and affiliation of the expert Bobby gives the impression that the fears he expresses in his post have the legitimate backing of an expert and are the outcome of thorough scientific studies. His intention is to convince those in authority and other sceptics that scientific studies on the EVD reveal that countries like Ghana, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are at a high risk of being infected by the dreaded disease and thus should take all possible precautions including imposing travel restrictions on affected countries. Expert extrapolation on the fatality of the disease is “...really scary” and the expert hopes “...to see this NOT happening.” The capitalization of the negative marker (NOT) is to construct a mental picture of a human catastrophe of unimaginable scale which the expert would not wish to see happen. The ideology behind brandishing the expected casualty figure by September explicitly is aimed at raising public awareness on the dreaded disease but is also intended to create fear and panic in public sphere so as to compel the government into taking steps that will protect American citizens from contracting the disease.

PT 208: Bobby

Physicist Alessandro Vespignani of Northeastern University in Boston is one of several researchers trying to figure out how far Ebola may spread and how many people around the world could be affected. Based on his findings, there will be 10,000 cases by September of this year and it only gets worse from there. Extrapolating existing trends, the number of the sick and dying mounts rapidly from the current toll—more than 3000 cases and 1500 deaths—to around 10,000 cases by September 24, and hundreds of thousands in the months after that. “The numbers are really scary,” he says—although he stresses that the model assumes control efforts aren’t stepped up. “We all hope to see this NOT happening.” Vespignani has analyzed the likelihood that Ebola will spread to other countries...In general, the chance of further spread beyond West Africa is small, Vespignani says, but the risk grows with the scale of the epidemic. Ghana, the United Kingdom, and the United States are among the countries most likely to have an introduced case....

In a country like Nigeria where corruption and mismanagement of state resources have affected social development, the outbreak of the EVD posed a great

challenge to its medical experts. The disease broke out when members of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) were on a nationwide strike. The attitude of the general public to Nigerian medical professionals can be seen in **PT.1:** (Francis EseDoghor) “Where are the paper professors in Nigeria only good in going on strike.” The labelling of Nigerian medical professors as “paper professors” by Francis shows lack of confidence in the competence of Nigerian medical professionals. Most Nigerians believe the frequent strike actions embarked upon by Nigerian health professionals have affected service delivery adversely. The negative representation of the professors shows the attitude of most Nigerians to Nigerian health workers in general. Thus, the mass hysteria in public sphere about the disease compels both the government and its citizens to start sourcing for quick solutions – orthodox and unorthodox. Some of the alternatives the “experts” presented were the warm salt water solution; the bitter kola solution; and the *ewedu* solution.

In **PT 9** we see two participants comment on the efficacy of *ewedu* as a possible solution to the Ebola virus disease. The participants base their contributions on the expert opinion of a certain university professor of ophthalmology.

PT9: Commenter

A Professor of Ophthalmology at the Lagos State Teaching hospital, LUTH, Prof Adebukola Adefule Oshitelu, has laid claims that ‘Genus Corchorus’ popularly known as *Ewedu* in Nigeria is capable of curing the Ebola Virus Disease. She said this at the 2014 African Traditional Medicine organised by NAFDAC yesterday at Ikeja, Lagos state.

NosaOsula: Dem don start again (They have started again), very soon *ewedu* will become expensive in the market, I beg unaooo (I plead with you)

Dele Akinola: Hope Nigerians will not start taking overdose of EWEDU and end up with the same deadly result as SALT solution o!

Both participants have different reasons for doubting the *ewedu* solution to EVD. While Nosa is afraid of the cost implication of the vegetable as a result of its new status as a possible cure of the disease, Dele is afraid of the health implication of its abuse. Both intertextually refer to a previous situation in which such an unscientific prescription turned fatal. Nosa’s “Dem don start again... (They have started again...)” is a vague reference to the rumour that warm salt water consumed at certain hour of the day could cure or prevent the contraction of the disease which eventually resulted in the death of some and the hospitalization of many. Dele’s is a blunt reminder of the fatal consequences of the warm salt water consumption. Again, both commentators implicitly doubt the expert prescription of Prof Oshitelu, an eye specialist, who may

not be really professionally competent in that particular domain of pharmaceutical or medical sciences. Both posts implicitly discredit the claim that *ewedu* can cure the EVD. Further, both comments implicitly doubt the efficacy of traditional medicine, otherwise known as alternative medicine, as providing a solution to the EVD. This is not surprising given the knowledge that many have either died or sustained permanent disabilities/damages as a result following the dubious claims and prescriptions of quack traditional medicinal practitioners. Thus, both comments caution against panic-driven and scientifically unsubstantiated prescriptions.

PT 17 from the government of Lagos State is an attempt to use a multimodal semiotic form to refute and discredit the use of unorthodox practices by Lagosians and other Nigerians, and to educate the populace on the right things to do in the prevailing circumstance. The speech act that is performed in the Lagos State discourse is informative. The state, as an institutional voice, sees the dissemination of appropriate information on the EVD as one of its responsibilities. Given the wave of myriad and conflicting information being circulated through oral and written medium on the EVD, the state believes its audience is most likely to believe any information that emanates from government sources. Again, most Lagosians believe in the administration of Governor Fashola because of his transformational achievements in the state. Thus, any information that is believed to emanate from his office is likely to be accepted by most Lagosians. The use of its official symbol/logo and website (created for communicating information on the disease) in the message confers legitimacy, authority and credibility on the information being communicated to the public.

PT 17: Lagos Ebola Response

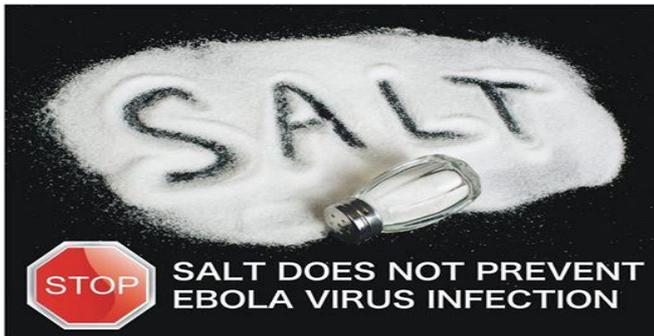
Remember, the more informed the people around you are about Ebola, the safer you are. Make sure you do your part to educate them.



EBOLA ALERT!

If you received any message about drinking and bathing with salt in warm water to prevent Ebola Virus infection, and you believed and spread that message, here are some small 'tips' for you:

Please visit www.lagosebolarespons...



The post is a multimodal text in which the agency refutes the claim of salt and warm water efficacy against Ebola; urges the general public to be well informed about the disease; and provides the website to be visited for more information on EVD.

In **PT 18**, the agency provides an expert opinion on the disease in the form of facts. The aim is to provide the public with more accurate facts about the disease, create the impression the agency has enough information on it and has the capacity to control its spread, and provide the contact links to be consulted for more information or help on the matter.

PT 18: Lagos Ebola Response



LagosEbolaResponse#Ebolafacts

1. The Ebola Virus is named after the Ebola River where the first outbreaks occurred in 1976.
2. Ebola kills 90% of its victims
3. Ebola is transmitted through body secretions such as sweat, blood, saliva, mucous, breast secretion, tears, urine and sexual transmission from an infected person.

For More follow @lagosebolaresp on Twitter, Call 0800 EBOLA HELP and like this page. Be Informed

The warning, “Be Informed”, shows the need for the public to be properly equipped with the right information on the disease. Those in authority believe that lack of adequate information or misinformation was largely responsible for the hysteria and panic-driven approaches that many resort to. By this discourse, the government presents itself as a responsible agency that is interested in the social and political wellbeing of the populace.

2. Appeals to God as a Legitimate Power Source

Participants in **PTs 21-39** make appeals to God as the only legitimate power source who can protect them from the dreaded Ebola virus. **PT 23**, the only post from the United States, acknowledges the sinful nature of the American nation; recollects its work of charity to others; recognizes the failure of its political leadership; asks for God’s mercy; and calls for prayers by all people of faith, particularly all Christians. Ciel’s comment carries the ideology that disease and pestilence come from sin and that the American nation, by the fact of this disease, is paying for its departure from its Christian faith. Ciel also blames the unidentified enemies of America for repaying the American nation with “insults and hatred and persecution.”

PT 23: Ciel

I pray that all God fearing Americans, all people of Faith, all Christians will join together spiritually in prayer and beg the merciful God to have mercy on this nation, although America has become so perverted as nation, though its enemies seek to wipe out the name of God, this country has long had a history of utmost charity, giving money and charity to help others, even when it hurts, in return for which it has received insults and hatred and persecution. Though chastisement may be merited for the level of perversion our enemies have brought to this country, let us remember humbly that His mercy is above all his works. Pray, pray, pray and beg for His mercy to contain this pandemic. Blessed be God. Blessed be His holy name. Lord have mercy on us. Our leaders have failed us. Our hope is in Him, alone.

Most of the posts from Nigeria assert the supremacy of God and His ability to protect them from the disease. Margaret (**PT 28**) asserts her belief in the word of God by quoting the book of Isaiah to evoke God’s promises in a time like this. **PT 35** interrogates the sudden recourse to God and asks if people actually fear God the way they fear the EVD. The comment delegitimizes the hypocrisy of the people who now turn to God because of the prevailing social situation. The data under consideration showed that 9.13% of the posts made appeals to God as a legitimate power source. The appeals to God present most Nigerians as people of faith and also shows that humans are most likely to resort to God (and other superhuman forces) whenever it appears that

human wisdom is incapable of rescuing them or has failed to rescue them from desperate and critical situations.

PT 28: Margaret Agbor

All these preparations for Ebola? nooo, GOD ALMIGHTY is not a member of all these committees, but he is in charge. ONLY MY COUNCIL SHALL STAND SAYS THE LORD ALMIGHTY Isaiah 46-10-11. Ebola is not GODs council

PT 30: Moji Akinhanmi

God honoured His word that no evil shall befall on neither shall any plague come near dwelling place. Oh all glory to Jesus the Eternal KING!!!

PT 35: osagiejacobs

Do we fear God the way we fear Ebola?

PT 37: South Eastern

#God answers all prayers#

Happy moments - Praise God, Difficult moments-Seek God,

Quiet moments -Worship God, Painful moments-Trust God,

Every moment - Thank God.

PT 38: TeddTerlumunAvuveh

Praise God ye daughter of Zion and all ye that love The Lord, for His mercies endureth forever more and His promises are ever sure upon His children. Shalom.

The posts show that most Nigerians appeal to God for protection in the face of serious life challenges. They also reveal the beliefs and attitude of the people to the supernatural and their lack of confidence in human institutions. Most Nigerians tend to express more confidence in God and other supernatural forces whom they perceive and revere as all powerful, impartial and incorruptible than in human political authorities which they perceive as corrupt, partial and incompetent. While most posts from Europe and North America legitimize by appeals to institutions of state like the political class/leadership, the people, the CDC or medical professionals, their Nigerian counterparts take their appeals to divine court. This shows how both groups understand their social situations and their responses them.

3. Appeals to Political and Ideological Sentiments

The discourse on Ebola also exhibits strands of political and ideological expressions. Every contextual use of language is ideological, implicitly or explicitly stated (Eggin, 2004). Even though the EVD is in the domain of medicine or public

health discourse participants make comments that betray their political and ideological orientations and biases. Interestingly, one of the participants, **Michael LandersCoffee Steve**, recognizes that public discourse on the disease has become politically coloured and cautions against politicizing it : “Please STOP trying to make this discussion into a political one.....it just doesn't help the situation one bit.....quite frankly it is just ignorant of you to suggest it is a political issue in the first place.” However, another participant, (MrMidnyteMichael Landers), counters that “It is a political issue” because “The administration is playing with our lives and well-being.” The exchanges show that discourse participants make no distinctions between social issues and the reactions of political actors and parties in charge of the state at the time of the event. The comments therefore reveal how the citizens of a state perceive the intentions and actions of social actors in combating social challenges at local and global levels. The views expressed in the posts under consideration are political in the main but while some are explicit others are implicit but still orient towards scoring a political point. Most of the comments from America exhibit the Democratic versus Republican political and ideological dichotomy on American politics. The comments from Africa reflect the political and socio-economic climate in Africa and the tenor of relationship between the rulers and the ruled. 33.65% of the posts were politically motivated. This showed that the political dimension to the disease was dominant in the perception of the discourse participants. It also shows that serious social challenges such as the outbreak of SARS and EVD could motivate more of political responses from the citizens than the required social or medical solutions. This shows the interconnectedness between political discourse and other forms of public/social discourse.

PT 141: Commenter

Right wingers are liars and murderers of fellow Americans, Don't believe anything else. 45,000 Americans die every year due to lack of health insurance. The Right likes having the working poor die in their thousands. They won't lift a finger to help them. It makes them feel that overall life has an edge to it and people pay for their "sins" I guess, like losing their jobs. As usual, the Right wing will use any tragedy or issue to try to smear Obama unfairly. We cannot cut the USA off from the world or Africa and the procedures now in place will keep the number of Ebola cases low or non-existent. And we face far worse health issues every day, like regular viruses that kill thousands every year. Under George W. Bush there were hundreds of SARS cases requiring quarantines and CDC interventions, which were successfully carried out. Nonetheless, he never instituted travel bans on countries where SARS comes from, because it was not needed. The desire to use health crises and emergencies and dead bodies for cheap meretricious

political warfare is what distinguishes the low morality and low intellect of the Obama haters.

PT 143: SteveMarcus Wel

Republicans cut funding to fight Ebola...9-9-14

House Republicans indicated Tuesday that they will provide less than half of the White House's funding request to fight Ebola in the next government spending bill. According to a source familiar with the negotiations, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-Ky.) agreed as of Tuesday morning to spend a total of \$40 million to fight the epidemic in the 2015 spending bill.

Posts 141 & 143 are explicitly Obama and Democratic Party sympathizers. They are metonymic representations of the Democratic Party attitude to the EVD. They label those opposed to President Obama's approach to the EVD as "low morality and low intellect...Obama haters." The Republicans are also carriers of the negative attribution "liars" and "murderers" for running policies that hurt average Americans. To them, the lack of health insurance, job losses and cutting down on funding for fighting the EVD as a result of right wing policies presents the party as anti-Americans and anti-human. The comments implicitly frame democrats as the true lovers of the American people unlike the opposition party who allow 45,000 Americans die every year as a result of lack of health insurance. The two support Obama's refusal to impose flight restrictions on Ebola endemic countries, a position being clamoured for by most Republicans.

PT 169: KarlecSteve

How much money does it cost to stop flights in and out of affected countries?? ZERO!!! YOUR PRESIDENT did this! Not the Republicans and/or ANY amount of money! Haven't we had enough of democrat's incompetence!?? They have concerned themselves so much with racial tension and violence, and passing abortion and gay rights legislation, that they let this deadly disease just walk right into our country. So shut the hell up about Republicans did this and Republicans did that. The Democrats YOU voted for did this. YOU are just as responsible and accountable!

PT 180: Hopsaregoodchuckn

Remember that on November 4th that a vote for a Democrat at any level of government is a vote for Obamas anti-American destructive polices.

PT 198: chucknKarlec Ebola and Dems? The only thing Dems really care about is Gay rights, gay marriage and abortion.

PTs 169, 180 and 198 express opinions that present the speakers as being opposed to Obama and the democrats' approach to the EVD. **PTs** 169 and 198 go beyond the current issue under debate to criticize some policy issues that Republicans are traditionally opposed to but favoured by the Obama regime and democrats such as gay rights, gay marriage and abortion. The discourse shows that participants hide under the current debate to lash out at the regime and all other "democrat's incompetence" the Obama regime represents. To the commenters, Obama's refusal to impose travel restrictions on some Ebola affected countries is a sign of incompetence. Ideologically, the comments show the pro-conservatives do not want any contact between the infected/contaminated you and the uncontaminated me. It is an indirect way of establishing social distances between the unaffected America and the affected Africa (the perceived source of the disease). It can also be inferred that most Republicans feel the President's refusal to imposed travel restrictions on some African countries is a display of empathy with Africa, his traditional roots.

Some African and non-African contributors also represent the political leadership in Africa as corrupt, incompetent and extravagant. They attribute the inability of African leaders to combat the disease to corruption, maladministration and misplacement of priority agenda. They seek to bring corrupt African political leaders to account for the huge economic assistance they received from internal and external sources. **PTs** 132 & 137 are critical of the regimes in Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively. Albert in **PT** 132 evokes the historical knowledge frame of the reader with his reference to Presidents Doe and Taylor. Both leaders were known for their corruption, human rights abuses and neglect of the social welfare of the Liberian people. By that reference Albert does not want a recurrence of the social circumstances that led to civil unrest and war in Liberia. Pins in **PT** 137 is a negative representation of the government of President Koroma whom he frames as irrational and emotional for giving a sensitive position like that of health minister to an unqualified and incompetent fellow, who happens to be his girlfriend. Mr Pins wants the reader to see the president as being insensitive to the social well-being of the people of Sierra Leone. He also presents Mr Koroma as corrupt and extravagant for purchasing SUVs for his ministers at the expense of the health sector. These reasons justify his labelling Mr Koroma a "stupid president." Violet in **PT** 149 expresses disgust at Mr koroma's extravagance and insensitivity to the conditions of his people: "Your president buys SUV's for ministers worth well over \$60k and could not afford to get you a better health system. Or how about clean water and sanitary working/living conditions?"

PT 132: [Albert Dempster](#)

For us in Liberia it is only God almighty can save us. This government is only about corruption, hard to learn quick to forget, the same thing that kill Prs Doe and put Taylor

in jail is the same they are doing. With all of the million of dallors this government had received what have they done with it. The same rope that hang monkey can also be used to hang baboo TWT!!!!!!!

PT 137: Pins Edward

Mr. Ibrahim Koroma why don't you ask your stupid president that question. President Koroma gave the job of Ministry of health to his girlfriend Miatta Kargo instead of giving it to someone who is qualified. Yes Ibrahim Koroma, doctors from America and Europe will be evacuated because they pay taxes in their countries and their President unlike yours gives a damn about them. Your president buys SUV's for ministers worth well over \$60k and could not afford to get you a better health system. Mr Ibrahim Koroma you should be at State House with your friends protesting.

PT 147: Commenter

They need to have much stricter travel regulations for these countries affected. That is the real issue along with a lax system of security in the hospitals etc. where patients seem to have no problem leaving if they don't want to be there. Why doesn't Africa have a good system of quality hospitals for their sick? Where is all that aid money going to? I think it is probably being spent on bigger palaces for the ruling class to frolic in myself while the population lives in filth and poverty. How about addressing that part of the equation? WHO is being held accountable for all that money given to these countries if they cannot even treat the sick there and rely on volunteers?

The commenter in **PT 147** above makes a negative evaluation of political leadership in some African countries. The interrogatives are intended to elicit the sympathy of the reader and raise a moral condemnation of the culture of corruption and unaccountability that has become a norm in most African countries. The commenter uses the excuse of corruption and leadership failure in some African countries to justify the call for travel restrictions on some African countries and the withdrawal of foreign medical professionals working in EVD endemic countries. Similarly, the commenter in **PT 191** labels African political leaders "arrogant bastards" because of their self centredness and anti-people policies.

PT 191: Commenter

Failed leadership. That's an epidemic everywhere. Politicians are too busy lining their pockets and making laws which benefit their cronies to be bothered with THE PEOPLE, whom they have the responsibility to serve and protect. But the arrogant bastards don't see themselves as public servants, which is in reality what they are truly supposed to be. They consider themselves above all that, which is why they need to be

booted out into the street with no big severance packages, and new people voted in who will actually represent, and protect, ordinary people.

Oluwaseun in **PT 155** below conceptualizes the EVD as a security phenomenon. He equates its ferocity and capacity for destruction with that of the Boko Haram terrorist group. The ideology that underlies the metaphor is to present President Jonathan as incompetent for his inability to contain the aggression from two major threats to the Nigerian nation: the EVD and Boko Haram. To the commenter, there is no difference between EVD and the terrorist group. Both are formidable agents of death and destruction against innocent and defenceless Nigerians, and are depicted as “matching unopposed” by the Jonathan government and being “on the loose” against a vulnerable populace

PT 155: OluwaseunPhillip

Is security not supposed to be one of Goodluck Jonathan's 7-Point Agenda? Have we ever been this unsecure in this country? With Boko Haram matching unopposed against us and Ebola on the loose? Woe to his supporters.

Besides posts that express explicit political or ideological orientation, there are also others that attack or express lack of confidence in the political class/leadership; that express the ideology of social inequality; and those that delegitimize the actions of some powerful groups in the society. The posts show that people conceal or reveal their ideological and political positions during moments of national emergency even when the situation may not be political in the main. Again, the posts show that public comments in crisis situations are chiefly political and ideological and provide an opportunity for the public to appraise the policy and performance of government of the day.

4. Ethnic and Racist Discourse on EVD

The fear that the dreaded disease would soon spread to parts of Europe and America made many discourse participants in several online forums, particularly those in the United States, to express xenophobic feelings and outright racial disapproval towards Africa and Africans. The undisguised use of discourse of racism in this context reveals the nature of race and intergroup relations between the West and others. 18.75% expresses deep racist sentiments in veiled and explicit forms. The news in local media in the United States that an infected Liberian had just landed in the country; that American doctors and troops were being deployed to Liberia and Sierra Leone; and that some volunteer American health workers in Liberia had contracted the disease triggered both fear and hatred for Africa (a place and its people) and the entire black race as can be gleaned from the comments below.

PT 77: Commenter

Can't take a hint to stay out of that African sewer. So you die.

PT78: Commenter

Why would any sane person go to a country that is infected with every disease that living organisms will contract? Africa is just a petrie dish of diseases. Where do you think AIDS comes from? I don't feel sorry for anyone contracting a deadly disease if they go to African nations. Sorry. The whole continent should be quarantined.

The nature of the posts shows they are interactive. Barnaby's post that Africa be quarantined prompted others to make comments and by so doing express their biases and sentiments. While some are mild in their expression of otherness **PTs 77 & 78** are obvious in their aversion of the other. Negative metaphors and attributions such as "sewer", "petrie dish of diseases" and the roots of AIDS were used to justify why "The whole continent should be quarantined" instead of the affected countries in West Africa. The negative attributes used to describe Africa was intended to create fear in the mind of many and stifle public feelings and empathy towards it. Some of the posts also describe Africa as the home of terrible diseases such as tuberculosis and leprosy, while such words are unknown to us (the US). The negative perception of the black race by the White explains why **PT 58** inhumanly exclaims, "Let them die off for crying out loud", while another suggests that Africans who refuse to be quarantined should be shot by soldiers (**PT 47**). America is framed as a "Big Brother" who spends billions of tax payers' money trying to civilize Africa in the areas of "infectious disease prevention education (including AIDS and Ebola!) agricultural support, education programs, election management, etc., etc., etc." Africans are also presented as ignorant and incapable of learning hence they "ignore the education" (**PT 79**) by Big Brother America and the West. **PTs 63, 68 & 71** depict racial hatred for others perceived as enemies of the American nation. The contributors are haters of Russia, Arabs and the Muslim world and therefore see nothing wrong with transporting the disease to these traditional enemies of America and the West. The comments express the ideology of Self and the Other. They reveal the attitude of some Americans to Russia and Muslims – the perceived "troublers" of innocent America and the world. Russia, a traditional ally of some 'dissident' Arab nations like Syria, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, whom **PT 71** describes as "Muslim idiots" and "violent Islamic scum" deserves doses of the EVD. The negative representation of outsiders and the lack of empathy for the suffering other, and the desire to extend the disease to Others except Us (the US) is racially and politically motivated.

PT 63: Commenter: Is it possible to transfer this epidemic to Russia?

PT 68: Commenter

Send someone with Ebola into the Middle East and spread it there. That would help the world.

PT 71: Commenter

So? Earth needs a culling every now and then, planets getting to where it can't sustain this growth anyhow. But before they try to end it, will someone carry the disease to the middle east and let it run rampant with all those muslim idiots so maybe we can have world peace? Let it run its course through those violent islamic scum...

5. The Construction of a thoroughly Evil Other

Many participants on the discourse on Ebola express their fears and anger on the news that the disease had been reported in their country by constructing the Index Case as a devil, a terrorist and/or a wicked fellow from the pit of hell. Most posts from Nigeria implicitly and explicitly label Patrick Sawyer a wicked man who deliberately chose to infect Nigeria with the disease. They believe that both Mr Sawyer and the Liberian government were aware of Mr Sawyer's condition prior to his departure to Nigeria. The Liberian people and government are labelled ingrates who chose to pay Nigeria back with evil despite Nigeria's supportive role in the restoration of peace in that country. Thus, Mr Sawyer/Liberia are labelled evil and wicked while infected Nigerians/Nigeria are innocent victims of the wicked. 19.23% of the posts construct the other: Patrick Sawyer, Liberia and/or Africa as thoroughly evil. Posts 84, 85, 86 and 87 construct Mr Sawyer as wicked and devilish for deliberately choosing to transport the EVD to "innocent" Nigeria and Nigerians. In the exchanges Nigeria is framed as the innocent victim of wicked Mr Sawyer and the Liberian government. Knowledge of the historical relationship between Nigeria and Liberia will explain why many of participants from Nigeria are disappointed at Mr Sawyer's behaviour. Nigeria has always presented itself as a big regional and continental brother. Its troops and government in the 1990s fought for the restoration of peace during the Liberian civil war and the return to civil rule. Most Nigerians therefore feel the country's regional and continental roles have not been reciprocated by the beneficiary nation-states. Thus, the assumption that Mr Sawyer may have deliberately decided to infect the country with the disease is perceived by many Nigerians as an act of ingratitude from Liberia and its people.

PT 84: Blessing Ukaegbu ·

Sawyer before he died, must have been a ticking time bomb. Could you imagine how he entered Nigeria to bombard innocent people with the deadly Ebola virus knowing

that he had had some contact with a confirmed Ebola patient (his sister) recently? Even his attitude at the hospital confirms this position. Why would a patient premeditate to infect health workers who are supposed to be treating him by deliberately urinating on them? This is the saddest story coming out of Nigeria so far.

PT 85: Ahmed Shaheen

Late Patrick Sawyer's wicked and demonic act in regards to the Ebola virus which he deliberately brought into our country is a clear indication that all countries in Africa hate Nigeria. They are all jealous of us. But the more they hate us the more we wax stronger. GOD pass them. May his wicked and devilish soul rest in pieces.

PT 86: Dickson Jand

Let us not be fool by just a mere story of Sawyer because it a deliberate act from some caucus in Liberia who realise that infecting the richest n giant of Africa country will draw a drastic attention to look for urgent cure since we are financially capable that was why Sawyer was sent purposely to lure Nigeria to be among the country which will attract international aid and support to look for urgent solution. Devil will pay u back Sawyer as u walk straight to hell.

PT 87: Anyi Moses

This is indeed a wicked act by Patrick Sawyer. Killing innocent people who worked to save life.

There are some Nigerians who are so aggrieved with Mr Sawyer's act that they frame him as an animal. Chilton (2004:47) contends that the extreme form of delegitimation is that which tries to "...deny the humanness of the other." **PTs 98 & 99: UzorAnizor** and **Dickson Jand** respectively, describe My Sawyer as "bull" and "beef." This is a strategy to present Mr Sawyer as wicked, heartless and merciless. This metaphor derives from the belief that only an animal can do what Mr Sawyer is being accused of – deliberately infecting innocent people with a dreaded disease. The ideology that underlies the negative attributes is intended to raise empathy for the victims of the disease and condemnation for Mr Sawyer.

Some participants see Mr Sawyer's action as an act of terrorism against the Nigerian state. Some believe the late Sawyer might be working for some terrorist organizations (see PTs 105, 115, 119 & 123 below). Representing Sawyer as a terrorist would have sounded strange a decade ago in Nigeria but the upsurge in global terror activities and the menace of Boko Haram in Nigeria since 2009 have altered the orientation of many Nigerians on national and personal security. They believe terrorists are mean and merciless and use different techniques at hitting hard at soft targets

(mainly civilians) so as to draw attention to their cause. In the case of Sawyer, even though it is a known fact that Mr Sawyer was an ECOWAS diplomat, many Nigerians still frame him as a potential terrorist. It can be inferred from the situational Nigerian contexts that the commenters' representation of Mr Sawyer as a terrorist is a deliberate exaggeration of his perceived wickedness and "devilhood" and an expression of what they perceive as potential danger to the nation. The framing is intended to demonize the referent so as to stir panic in public sphere and force the government to respond quickly to the prevailing social challenges.

PT 105: NwaGod King ·

Very wicked act both from a terrorist Sawyer and the Liberia Government.

PT 115: Jacob SuleNgwamah

By this man's action everybody should know that he has been paid by certain group of terrorist to take this dreaded Ebola to our land. Everybody should have a belief, with God by our side, Ebola has not come to stay, it will soon vanish in Jesus name. Amen

PT 119: Frank ChidiEzeronye ·

I think may be oyibo (the West) sent that man like boko h to terrorize Nigeria, its politics, soon we'll know the virus source by God's grace.

PT 123: EgorEfiok

Yes oh, medical terrorist, according 4 my good friend, Charles Novia.

Some participants from the US also perceive the EVD as a potential terrorist weapon that can be used against America and the West. Their comments reveal how concerned the average American is about terrorist use of a biological weapon against America. While most Nigerians see Mr Sawyer's action as an act of wickedness, their American counterparts see who ever that brings the disease to America as a terrorist. PTs 93, 100, 106 & 109 explicitly express the American fear for acts of terrorism and its effects on the psychological orientation of most Americans. PT 106 negatively represents some West African states as potential sites for terror activities and by so doing appeals for travellers from those countries to be placed on the watch list. Again, the fear that terrorists can weaponize the EVD shows the extent that terrorists can go to reach and hit hard on their targets.

PT 93: guyvsspy1SmellTheCoffee

The terrorists have stopped putting bombs on airplanes.....*they're putting Ebola patients on instead.*

PT 100: Commenter

What a perfect terror weapon, instead of blowing yourself up they send people willing to die for their cause infected with the virus to every major city we have. Don't think that those that would harm us haven't thought of this already. The rich and powerful will wall themselves away from the general population while the rest of us will be up the creek. Scary thought.

PT 106: Lucifer

Tom Clancy wrote about weaponizing ebola in "Executive Orders" in 1996. I'm surprised it hasn't ever been accomplished. Also, in "Debt of Honor", Clancy essentially foreshadows the 9/11 attacks using airliners. I cannot imagine that some terrorist group is NOT in Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone gathering ebola-infected blood samples under the guise of doctors.

PT 109: Laura

It isn't just the "oops, I didn't know I had it" traveler that we need to worry about. Our borders are incredibly porous. Just about anyone can come in...and anyone who thinks that a terrorist group couldn't send across biologic "suicide bombers" infected with Ebola or any other disease is giving the islamic extremists entirely too much credit for decency. Our borders need to be secured. The "illegals" problem is not just a social services issue, and anyone who is worried over only the cost of health care and education of illegal aliens is only seeing the tip of the iceberg. If you do not want Ebola and every other disease imaginable visiting YOUR family, not by accident but by criminal intent, demand a stop to illegal immigration immediately.

Another form of delegitimation of the other (Africa) by some Americans is the negative construction of Africa as the source of dreaded diseases. The speaker/writer who labels the continent so intends to persuade others to perceive Africa as an evil empire where nothing good can come from. It is a deliberate strategy to give Africa a negative face and have it ostracized (or quarantined) by other continents and races using the recent EVD outbreak as an excuse. **PT 96** below is not just racist in orientation but also an act in the demonization of the other. The commenter frames Africa, the carrier or peddler of many dreaded diseases, as being as dangerous as terrorists. He/she also presents the American president, Obama (the gay monkey in the Blight House), of being incapable of protecting Americans from the diseases that originate from Africa. The commenter implies the president is soft on Africa because he is black of African descent. The comment reveals the attitude and ideology of the writer on issues of America politics and identity.

PT 96: Commenter

The same way the a22 holes in the CDC and WHO lost the AIDS battle and are losing the measles battle and the polio battle and the ebola battle and the tuberculosis battle.... They FAILED to contain the infection. In fact, the CDC helped the govt create laws to PROTECT those with AIDS, making it a hate crime to try to avoid contact with them. Now, you have the gay monkey in the Blight House flying ebola victims right into your neighborhoods. He won't be happy until America looks like sub-Saharan Africka...AIDS, Typhoid, Malaria, Guinea Worms, Trichinosis, Trypanosomiasis, Cholera, Polio, Leprosy, Legionaire's Disease, Ebola, Elephantiasis and all the other lovely Africkan treats.

Conclusion

The data under consideration show that the outbreak of the EVD in some West African countries in 2014 caused a great deal of fear and hysteria in public sphere. Information about its nature became viral in both traditional and new media - conflicting and exaggerated about its causes, prevention and fatality. The fear of contracting the disease tremendously affected interpersonal relationships between individuals and altered traditional patterns of social behaviour. The fear of the disease also enabled individuals to express different kinds of sentiments like blaming the state/political leadership of inefficiency and apathy; make appeals to God as a legitimate power source; express expert opinions on the disease; make appeals to ethnic/racist sentiments; and construct the index case or his/her people as wicked or terrorists. The social media enabled discourse participants to express deep-seated sentiments on how they perceive the social relations between them and others. The use of discourse of racism, delegitimation and otherness by some participants in a situation that calls for unity of purpose in the pursuit of common good shows that ethnic/racial, religious, political and social discrimination is still part of our daily reality. The EVD is an issue in the domain of medicine but our study shows that most comments on it did not orient towards finding a medical solution to the challenge, rather they concerned themselves with matters of religion, politics, race and security. The discourse on the EVD therefore becomes a lens through which social distances and attitudes, and intergroup relations can be perceived.

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