

**MASS MEDIA HEALTH COMMUNICATION: IMPERATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE
HEALTH DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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Introduction

A Healthy nation is a wealthy nation. This popular axiom emphasizes the significant position of health in the development of any nation. The sense in the axiom is simple – it takes a healthy person to work or attend to obligations, duties, assignments, tasks and jobs in every society. It is this attending to various tasks and endeavors by healthy individuals that result in a Nationswealth and development. The thought expressed here presents much concern to most nation's government and institutions who Realize the indispensable role of health in accentuating national development. The concern of this paper will not be centered on government but on an institution of government – the media. Thus the thrust will be to explore the role the media has played in championing the course of sustainable health development in Nigeria, a subject that is vital and crucial towards our socio-economic and political development. In discussing the subject, the paper will attempt to operationalize the key concepts in the topic, highlight the theoretical framework upon which the topic hinges; explore the role of the media in development; also x-ray media's health communication activities in Nigeria and concludes with conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptual framework

This paper revolves around three key concepts namely: Media, health communication, and sustainable health development. These key words need to be operationalised. It is

believed that by operationalising these terms, the issues being addressed in this paper will be made more explicate.

The Mass Media: The mass media comprise all technological or mechanical devices engaged by a source with the intent of reaching a diversified and heterogeneous audience with messages simultaneously. Okunna (1999) believes that mass media are a variety of channels through which mass communication takes place.

Health communication: According to Akinfeleye (1987), Health communication basically could be described as the form of communication disseminated by the mass media for adequate health care delivery office. Office of disease prevention and health promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human services posits that health communication is the study and practice of communicating promotional health information, such as in public health campaigns, health education, and between doctor and patient.

Hence, it will be right to assert that media health communication is the dissemination of health information by the media in order to influence peoples' health choice and improve their health literacy for sustainable health development.

As a concept, media health communication seeks to:

- Increase audience knowledge and awareness of health issue.
- Influence behaviors and attitudes towards a health issue.
- Demonstrate healthy practices.
- Demonstrate the benefits of behavior changes to public health outcomes.
- Advocate a position on a health issue or policy.
- Increase demand or support for health services.
- Argue against misconceptions about health.
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Sustainable Health Development: This entails achieving a complete wholeness in terms of an individual's physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being through a well structured and designed health program. It denotes the continuous maintenance of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not just merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework upon which this paper will be anchored is on the development media theory.

Development Media Theory

The development media theory was formulated by Mcquail in 1989. As a theory, development media theory seeks to explain the normative behaviors of the press in developing countries. (Asamah 2011). Okunna (1999) affirms thus, "development media theory came into existence to conceptualize the relationship between the mass media and the political system in developing countries, because none of the four classical theories adequately described this institutional linkage". In effect development media theory was basically propounded to reflect developing nations' primary engagement of the media for development course.

Development media theory owes its evolution to the UNESCO's Macbride commission set up in 1979 to look at communication problems around the world especially as it relate to the imbalance in communication (news) flow from the developed world to developing world. Ndolo (2005) speaking on this theory, presents that it is opposed to

dependency and foreign domination and arbitrary authoritarianism while accepting economic development and nation building as overriding objectives.

The development media theory according to Okunna (1999), accepts that economic development and nation building should take precedence over some freedom of the press and of individuals. Okunna's assertion implies that the development media theory demands that the media subjugate themselves to the political, social, economic, cultural and health needs of the nation.

Asamah (2011) simplified the theory thus "it is all about positive engagement and usage of the media in national development for the autonomy and cultural identity of the particular nation. Defleur, M and Rokeach, S (1989) note that the basic concept about this theory of communication is the idea of reporting or writing about development issues in developing countries, which do not form the agenda of international media discourse.

Mcquail (1987) identified the major tenets of the development media theory as follows:

- Media should accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy;
- Freedom of the press should be opened to restriction according to economic priorities and development needs of the society;
- Media should give priority in news and information to link with other developing countries, which are close geographically, culturally or politically;
- In the interest of development ends, the state has the right to intervene in or restrict media operations and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified;
- Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.

Going by this theory, the dissemination of information and news on all subjects that makes for positive development of developing nation becomes an imperative of the media. It is on their premise, that the media's health communication becomes an imperative for sustainable health development in a developing country like Nigeria and other third world countries.

Media health communication activities in Nigeria

Mass media remain a key component and veritable tool in the campaign toward sustainable health development in Nigeria. This is so because through adequate health communication and campaigns on issues of health such as drugs abuse, vaccines/immunizations, maternal health care, family planning programs, healthful living practices, prevention practices, cure eradication of diseases etc. The mass media have proven to be very concern about our health development.

In this discourse, an attempt will be made to highlight some media health communication activities in Nigeria. These will include:

- **Poliomyelitis Vaccine Controversy:** In 2003 and 2004, the fight against the eradication of poliomyelitis suffered a serious setback in the Northern part of Nigeria owing substantially to wide spread rumors and misconceptions among Muslims over the safety of the vaccine. The federal government had to engage the media in

conjunction with the traditional rulers to allay these fears through health communication on the polio virus and the safety of the vaccine.

- **Family Planning Program:** The media in Nigeria were seriously engaged by the government on the issue of family planning. Through media health communication on the subject, the socio-economic consequences of an unplanned family were drummed into the consciousness of Nigerians. The media highlighted the health implications to the women who go on having children every year and the economic consequence which reflects in untrained children, inability to access health facilities and other needs. The media health communications on this subject resulted in family planning consciousness amongst Nigerians.
- **Health Communication on Immunization:** In Nigeria, immunization sessions are organized and screened on the television on regular basis. In recent times, during these immunization sessions, health stakeholders address women on their vital roles as mothers of the Nigerian children. The radio too had been put to very effective use in broadcasting the program to the masses, especially those that do not have access to the television programs. During these exercises, the print media such as newspapers and magazines, flyers and so on were not excluded.

From the above, it is quite obvious that media health communication on immunization have contributed immensely to immunization campaign successes in Nigeria. The media's contributions here hinge on their recognition of the importance of health towards national development (Abone, 2008).

- **Malaria Control:** Media health communications have aided in the fight and control of malaria. Through this means, the people have been sensitized, and educated on the causes and ways of checking the spread and treatment for the disease. However, it is the area of checking or controlling malaria that the media, especially radio in Nigeria has played a significant role. This is because malaria seems to be endemic amongst the poor of the society who require being educated on the causes and intervention methods. Thus, radio talks, drama etc are organized on regular basis in order to educate the poor masses on how to fight mosquitoes. Media communication on malaria program such as roll-back-malaria is carried daily emphasizing why we should sleep under nets and keep our environments clean.
- **Health Communication on HIV/AIDs Pandemic:** Since the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDs) came into Nigeria, media health communication on the disease has been immense. The people have been sensitized through NTA Network health programs; adverts and slogans on AIDs have been carried by mass media channel of Television and Radio. Newspapers and magazines also carry articles and cartoons on the scourge. Health providers from time to time take to the various media to inform, educate, encourage and direct the public on the way forward with HIV/AIDs. The media in Nigeria have fully taken up the challenge posed by HIV/AIDs pandemic through effective communication on the disease to the people.

- **Health Communication on Ebola Virus:** Ebola virus disease (EVD) also known as Ebola hemorrhagic fever has been in existence for about four decades before its first case appeared in Nigeria on July 20, 2014. According to Hewlett B and Hewlett B (2007), Ebola virus disease was reported around the region of the River Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) formerly Congo Kinshasa and Zaire) in 1976. All these years, media health communication on this pandemic in Nigeria was simply unfounded but with the first recorded case of Ebola in Nigeria being found in Patrick Sawyer of Liberia, the Nigerian media suddenly was agog with health communication that informed the citizenry about all they need to know about the disease ranging from its origin, causal agents, symptoms signs and safety behaviors.

In handling the Ebola pandemic in Nigeria, health and government officials fully appreciated the importance of communication through the various media channels in reaching the citizenry. They rallied communities to support contain measures, house-to-house information campaigns and messages on local radio stations and television, in English and local dialects were used to explain the level of risk, effective personal preventive measures and actions being taken for control. The seriousness with which media health communication on Ebola was undertaken underscores the seriousness of the pandemic and the enormous danger it pose to sustainable health development in Nigeria.

Conclusion.

The role of mass media in combating health promotion for sustainable health development throughout the world remains vital. Without the mass media, it might be difficult for health promoters and stakeholders to communicate health information, monitor and co-ordinate health activities in various countries of the world. In this paper, effort was made to highlight media health communication activities in Nigeria. It was shown that the media has ensured successes to health programs through their communications and sensitization of the citizenry. Notable successes being their role in the eradication of polio, awareness on family planning and the containing of the Ebola virus. The above leaves one to conclude that media's health communication in Nigeria is becoming an instrument for sustainable health development seeing that the information they disseminate is providing knowledge to the people on ways of combating diseases.

Recommendations

- The mass media should be seen as an integral part of governance in matters concerning health.
- Civil societies, the private sectors, parliaments, external agencies etc should render supports to the media in the area of health communication.
- Media practitioners should Endeavour to inject health communication or message in their programs as this will make for a greater reach.

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