



POLICY BRIEF

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Mitigating Information Disorder on COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic came during the era of infodemic which is characterized by overabundance of highly disordered information such as disinformation and misinformation. So many fake and “half-true” information have been circulated about the origin, causes, treatments, consequences and the “agenda” behind the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the subsequent vaccination campaigns. Meanwhile, the negative consequences of COVID-19 pandemic could be profoundly mitigated when people strictly adhere to the proactive and reactive measures such as regular washing of hands and use of face mask. Unfortunately, the rumours, fake news and conspiracy theories circulated have profoundly misled and/or confused a good percentage of the African population resulting in a high rate of non-compliance. Some of the widely circulated fake news in Nigeria includes:

1. COVID-19 disease will not survive here due to hot climate.
2. COVID-19 can be treated with shea butter¹ and other forms of concoction.
3. The vaccine contains microchips that will be used to control human beings like robots.
4. It was a “phoney”, an opportunity for government officials to embezzle public funds.

These are just a few among countless unfounded claims. Unfortunately, Nigeria is still battling with this problem which eventually greatly retards the COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rate. Based on the foregoing, mitigating all kinds of information disorder, especially misinformation and disinformation, on COVID-19 should be an important policy consideration in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic and possibly, other future pandemics. Some of the policy recommendations are highlighted below.

Appropriate Information Supply

At the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, most people including some health professionals did not



have sufficient information about the disease and that was one of the major enablers of misinformation and disinformation about the cause, treatments and non-pharmaceutical interventions. To ensure effective supply of information, we must avoid three things: information underload, overload and misload. Information underload is about the scarcity of information, while overload is the opposite. The

information mislead is about giving information to the wrong target or at the wrong time or through the wrong medium. Hence, appropriate information flow should be integrated into the strategic policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and indeed, future pandemics.

Indigenous Health Communication

Indigenous languages and innovations should be adopted to ensure an appropriate supply of COVID-19 related information. Presently, most of the campaign materials against COVID-19 are developed in English language and difficult to understand by non-professionals and this has profoundly diminished the impact of the information. Studies have established



that false information circulates faster among illiterates and it is more difficult to control because they are dependent on oramedia. Unfortunately, the illiterates account for 38% of Nigeria's population. Therefore, to counter the effect of disordered information among these groups, indigenous languages and innovations should be greatly explored.

Understanding Information Disorder Ecosystem by Health Professionals and Scientists

Public health agencies and policymakers involved in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic need to understand the information disorder ecosystem, the trajectory and the elements involved in the production, distribution, consumption and redistribution of the disordered information. This is necessary for effective intellectual deliberation, policy formulation and implementation. So far, there is an apparent low level understanding of basic concepts that explain information disorder. At the early stage of COVID-19 pandemic, there were a number of conceptual dilemmas in the use of several terms to depict COVID-19 related information disorder. Concepts such as



rumours, fake news, deep fakes, propaganda, conspiracy theories, fake news, clickbait, hoax news, false information, disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation were wrongly applied or misused with

respect to COVID-19 and therefore, they were inappropriately tackled. It is thus recommended that understanding information disorder ecosystem should be integrated into the routine policy plans against COVID-19 pandemic.

Fact-checking for Health Professionals and Scientists

The rise of disinformation and misinformation lead to the development of fact-checking, debunking and verification of doubtful information. It is a new genre of journalism that can be practiced by any interested person. Therefore, health professionals should be



encouraged to get some basic skill on fact-checking COVID-19 related information. Getting the skill will encourage them to fact-check doubtful information and appropriately debunk false information using various mediums, such as social media, blogs, social gathering and radio.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) for Health Professionals and Scientists

Media and information literacy (MIL) is one of the best mechanisms for fighting disordered information. It helps people understand how the media processes information and the best practices for information consumption and redistribution. Media literate people



have the capacity to identify false information and debunk it to reduce its circulation. Moreover, MIL improves the quality of informed decisions among people. Therefore, policymakers involved in the fight against COVID-19 should be encouraged to possess some basic skills in media and information management.

References

1. Ibrahim, M. A. (2020). Can the use of shea butter prevent you against covid-19? Not at all. An article to clarify a misinformation on COVID-19 published by the Science Communication Hub Nigeria <https://www.scicomnigeria.org/covid-19/Can-use-of-Shea-Butter-prevent-you-against-COVID%E2%80%939319%3F-Not-at-all>