

NAVIGATING THE TURBULENT SEA OF COVID -19 DISCOURSES: CRITICAL LITERACY SKILL TO THE RESCUE

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ABSTRACT

Following Nigeria's first confirmed case of the Coronavirus in February, 2020, there emerged diverse information from a multitude of unknown sources on how to curb and prevent the novel virus. As with other disease outbreak, the novelty of the disease created an information gap which made the net the last resort for Nigerians on the prevention and cure of the virus. Within a short period of time, unverified information on COVID-19 flooded the internet. Some questions beg for answers: How do we evaluate the news contents provided by online media such as Google, Facebook, and Whatsapp? This study is aimed at highlighting misinformation about coronavirus discourse in Nigeria and how critical literacy skill can be deployed to unravel the veracity of such sources of information. Data were generated from official publications, reputable journals, newspapers, conference papers, and internet sources. These sources were augmented with direct observations with the adherence to Covid-19 protocols. The content analysis method was used to analyse the data. The study revealed that there are quanta of misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria. Similarly, findings indicated that many Nigerians hardly put their critical literacy skills into practice as many of them swallowed hood, line, and sinker, every news item they read and heard about the pandemic without verifying their sources. On the basis of the findings, it was recommended among others that Nigerians should cultivate the habit of questioning digital news. Also, critical literacy skill should be included in Nigeria school curriculum. Last but not the least; parents should train their children to acquire critical thinking skills required for understanding online news.

Keywords: *Critical literacy, COVID -19 Discourse, Misinformation, Digital Technologies*

INTRODUCTION

Corona Virus Disease (coronavirus), otherwise called COVID-19, is believed to be caused by respiratory syndrome coronavirus2 (SARS-CoV-2). It is a global pandemic which has been in the news all over the world since November, 2019 through the turn of year 2020 and even till date. It is believed that the disease started in Wuhan, China. The virus is transmitted when one has a close contact with and inhales droplets from an infected person. In other words, the secretions from the olfactory glands, nostrils, and mouth of an infected person are contagious.

By 11th March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a pandemic. The pandemic has had its toll on familial and general human relationships and this in turn has clearly had overwhelming effects on health, economic, education, politics, sports, entertainment, security, and virtually all aspects of human endeavours. Today, the number of global death

record has continued to rise. However, health workers and Virologists have been able to get the vaccine for the cure of COVID-19 and some people have been vaccinated while some who have come up with some conspiracy theory on the hazard of the vaccine have refused to take the vaccine.

Nigeria recorded its index case of Coronavirus disease in February, 2020. As the cases of COVID-19 increased, the Federal Government of Nigeria announced a lockdown of major cities in order to curb its spread. By the 31st of May, 2020, Nigeria has recorded ten thousand, one hundred and sixty two (10,162) cases of COVID-19 (<https://nairametrics.com/2020/06/22/covid-19-update-in-nigeria/>, 2020). The rise in the spread of the viral disease caused anxiety and fear among the general public and this invariably made the populace to search the internet or answers for symptoms, cures and ways it could be contracted. As health workers struggle to contain the disease, opinions, rumors, misinformation, and hoaxes began to circulate the online news ecosystem on Covid-19 preventions and cures. It is in view of this that the Director General of the World Health Organization, Ghebreyesus (2020) reports that they are “not just fighting an epidemic; [but also] fighting an *infodemic*. This statement is not unconnected with the proliferation of misinformation on Covid-19 pandemic.

Misinformation flourished and became exacerbated by the development of digital technological tools such as phones, IPADs, internets, social media: Facebook, Whatsapp, instagram, twitter, amongst others. More than at any time in the past, phones, social media, and digital media on the internet have given wings to human thoughts. Anybody anywhere can cook up news, stories or propaganda and proto, the whole internet gives it undeserving publicity. In sum, the unrestricted access to online news channels made everyone a publisher of news item which spreads like wild fire. Invariably, many unwary individuals, particularly Nigerians, swallow misinformation hook, line and sinker almost every piece of news without verifying the source or veracity of the information. Undoubtedly, this has adverse effects on peoples’ mental health especially with the outbreak of the pandemic. The objective of this paper therefore is to explore the ways by which Paulo Freire’s critical literacy approach can be applied to tackle misinformation related to the outbreak and cure of COVID-19 pandemic.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Concept of Critical Literacy

The term literacy has over the years been perceived differently among different professions and project developers of different purposes. Thus, we have multiple literacies of which critical literacy is one. Critical literacy is an emancipatory process in which one not only reads the 'word' but also the 'world', a process whereby a person becomes empowered to be able to unveil and decode 'the ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms such as television and film, in order to reveal their selective interests' (Hassan, 2015).

There is no doubt that unlimited access to digitally mediated news/information is a common feature of our information age. This media outlet is often saturated with all forms of information and misinformation which are often quite voluminous. Scholars maintain that every

news either spoken or written carry the social, historical, cultural, and political, ideological perspectives of the writer (McNabb, 2006; Adegbite, 2020). Thus, a listener/reader needs critical literacy skill to be able to unravel writers' affiliations. With particular reference to digital news, readers need sharper critical lenses to navigate writers' intent because of their enormous volumes.

Critical literacy hinges on Rousseau's philosophy which sees a child as an active participant in the learning process and also on the work of Paulo Freire who opines that education should be concerned with the existential experience of the individual learner through reflection and action upon the world (Freire, 1972). Freire condemned the perception of education system as a bank, a repository from where learners can withdraw the needed knowledge for survival. He maintained that teachers do not have all the knowledge which they have to pass to learners. Rather, learners must construct knowledge from the knowledge they already possess. Learners are to engage in reflections upon reflections which lead to further action, all of which will invariably enable the learner to change the world for the better.

It must be stated that Freire's country home, Brazil, was underdeveloped at the time of his advocacy for critical pedagogy. The global economic crisis of 1929 led to socio-economic and political domination and which in turn led to ignorance and lethargy among the Brazilian populace (Timpson, 1988). As Nyirenda (2016:5) aptly captures it, half of the Brazilian population lived a culture of silence. They 'were illiterate and apathetic, downtrodden and fatalistic in their attitudes'. Having witnessed this and known that illiteracy was responsible for their predicament, Freire advocated critical pedagogy, which he believes could liberate the largely illiterate populace from ignorance.

The scenario painted of Brazil in the early part of the 19th century can be likened to Nigerian experience in 21st today. Majority of the Nigerian populace are illiterate. They live in abject poverty and ignorance and yet the 'culture of silence' reigns supreme: no one dares confronts the government on their insensitivity to the graft and socio-political malaise in the land. This is because those who do are quickly dubbed rebels and bundled into detention sometimes without trial. No right thinking Nigerian can forget quickly the reasons behind #EndSars and the Lekki Toll gate massacre of 20th October, 2020.

In sum, illiteracy and poverty, unemployment, low socio-economic problems are intertwined. To say the least, illiteracy is inimical to any form of development. It could be likened to a cankerworm that has eaten deep into every fabric of Nigeria body polity. One can safely state that illiteracy has obviously played out in the way and manner in which many Nigerians (both the literate and illiterate) have demonstrated their attitude to the numerous problems confronting almost all aspects of our national life and the issues relating to the prevention, cure and treatment of COVID-19 pandemic is not an exception. As rightly noted by Spring (2020), one may be educated and have high income and yet have low health literacy) especially if he is experiencing health challenge for the first time. Thus, it is not too surprising that even some literate Nigerian populace have some kind of awkward mentality or misconceptions and beliefs about the coronavirus pandemic.

With regards to issues related to health and in particular COVID-19 pandemic, people require critical literacy skill to be able to make right health decisions which will prevent or reduce high mortality arising from the pandemic. This is more so as the various sources of news,

especially the digitally mediated ones, are saturated with official and non-official news and no one could differentiate between fake and authentic ones. Indeed, it is believed that the misconceptions the pandemic arose from the unverified sources of news both digitally based and other news channels.

Misinformation induce pain while others are potentially dangerous for public consumption. Misinformation could lead people to take wrong actions. In the opinion of Tasnim, Hossain and Mazumder (2020), misinformation about health issues could lead to complacency and promotes practices that could aggravate the spread of the corona virus. This could ultimately have a devastating effect on individuals' physical and mental health. In the light of the health hazards that could result from misinformation on the pandemic, it becomes expedient for everyone to possess a critical literacy skill which would enable them to decipher correct information from the avalanches of misinformation circulating online news ecosystem while the pandemic lasts.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Globalization Theory

The social media plays a significant role in dissemination of information and the 21st century is especially replete with different types of social media. As Taiwo and Igwe (2020) observed, the entire world is connected together with the use of computer and the internet and a global village can only be maintained through the use of social media. However, the growing concern is that many of these news outlets have been abused as many people hide under their anonymity to spread fake messages and instigate panic amongst members of the general public (Taiwo and Igwe, 2020).

The thrust of this paper is hinged on Manuel Castells' (1996) Network Society. In his theory, Castells explores the power of the new advanced technologies and the accessibility of information. Cartells' model accentuates the roles of information communication technology (ICT) and internet in the transmission of information to a significant number of people across the globe with a speed of light. He conceptualizes this idea as "informationalism". This theory is relevant to this study as it provides the form through which one could view the phenomenon of COVID-19 and the role played by the social media in the dissemination of information to the people of Nigeria during the pandemic.

As information sharing becomes as fast as the speed of light, Castells (1996) maintains that a great number of people get news faster more than ever before. Given that information shared on social media go through slight or no examination, everyone becomes a publisher of news without reflecting on the harm, tension, panic, fear that such might bring to the recipients (Taiwo and Igwe, 2020). There seems to be a tendency for misinformation to spread faster like wild fire than the real or authentic news that are meant to caution or prevent some form of challenges. Social media, chiefly – WhatsApp, Facebooks, twitter, Instagram have become veritable tools of spreading misinformation because it seems very easy to share unverified information to a people in the same socio-space.

Besides information sharing function, the social media has been ‘appropriated to fix socio-psychological, political, economic, emotional, educational concerns; have used the same platform to inflict harms of different shades to the global community (Taiwo,2020:2). To this end, the onus lies on the readers to unveil the veracity of information on the media. Extant studies revealed that many people are unwary of misinformation on social media, so, they consume whatever information they stumble-on. Worst still, significant numbers of Nigerians lack the requisite skill to process and scrutinize information before acting according to details of the information. During the pandemic lockdown in Nigeria, quite a number of persons acted according to the dictates of the unverified news they received regarding COVID-19 on social media. As saving as misinformation seems, the general health of citizens is at stake. Thus, living in the highly digitalized society, such as Nigeria, one needs to possess critical literacy skills. It is sacrosanct for survival in the information-dense twenty first century (Coffey, 2008).

Importance of Information

Information is germane to human existence or survival. Knowledge of some information enables us to control or influence some people. It also helps us to make right decisions on virtually all aspects of human endeavours. More than ever before, there has been an upsurge or rapid development in the means of information sharing. There is the influx of digital technological devices and social-media applications through which information could be accessed or disseminated. One of the concerns of this paper is that these new channels of information could be misused to peddle fake news or misinformation as is the practice today. As mentioned earlier even at the risk of repetition, misinformation could have negative impacts on the human psyche or mental health. And with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of fake news became a common feature of the social media. As attempts were made to identify possible ways to contain the novel virus, opinions, rumors, and hoaxes begin to circulate on the possible prevention and cures of the virus. The effects of consuming unverified news have been devastating as some people who contracted the virus have died while efforts to contain its spread has been frustrated largely because of the astronomical spread of fake news. Therefore, this study examines how critical literacy skills could be deployed in unraveling misinformation among the gamut of information circulating the online news ecosystem on COVID-19 in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research of the survey type was adopted for the study. This research sought the views of some Nigerians on misinformation circulating the online eco-system regarding COVID -19 and their various reactions to them. Through simple random sampling technique, a total of three hundred Nigerians respondents were selected from Ondo state in Nigeria for the study. The instrument for the study was a self-constructed questionnaire entitled: COVID -19 Discourses and Peoples’ Reactions (CDPR) and secondary data generated from official publications, reputable journals, newspapers, conference papers, and internet sources. The instrument has two sections. The first section seeks basic information from the respondents; the subsequent sections

sought information regarding their opinions on COVID -19 in Nigeria. Before the instrument was administered, the test-retest method was used to determine its reliability. The instrument was administered twice within a two weeks interval. The results $r= 0.75$ shows that the instrument is reliable enough. The content analysis method was used to analyse the data.

FINDINGS

The following are the popular held opinions of Nigerians on COVID -19 Discourses

COVID -19 Does Not Affect Africans

Before Nigeria had its first index case, there were speculations across the country that people of African origin, Nigeria inclusive, cannot be infected with COVID-19 virus and that melanin protects Africans from the virus. This was not unconnected to the fact that a Cameroonian student in China, who was among the first people to contract the disease, responded well to treatment. Yet, there is no proof that melanin protects Africans from the coronavirus. There is also no scientific proof that African blood composition prevents Africans from contracting the pandemic.

COVID -19 Cannot Survive In Africa's Warm Climate

Related to the first speculation is the opinion that COVID-19 cannot survive in Africa's climate. The most quoted source to support this stand was John Nicholls (a Professor of Pathology in Hong Kong University) who asserted that 'in cold environments, there is longer virus survival than warm ones'. Though this hazy opinion was not based on verified research, it was nevertheless seized as a proof that the virus cannot thrive in Africa's warm climate. According to the WHO, the virus can be transmitted to all areas, whether hot or humid countries. The only continent that has no cases of COVID-19 is Antarctica (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/03/24/one-continent-remains-untouched-by-coronavirus-antarctica/>, 2020).

Alcohol And Chlorine Kill COVID-19

Information abound on online ecosystem that spraying alcohol and chlorine will kill the virus. But one of the questions that readily comes to a sane mind on this belief is: how can spraying of alcohol kill a virus that has already infected the body? There is growing evidence that spraying alcohol on one's body can be harmful, particularly to ones' eyes and mouth. It is also important to mention that the alcohol content in the sanitizer is not the same quantity with the alcohol that people drink.

Chloroquine Cures COVID-19

Rumour is rife, most especially on social media, that Chloroquine is a treatment for COVID-19 virus. The efficacy of Chloroquine is still being studied and there is no scientific proof yet to support the claim that it can cure or prevent the virus. Medical Doctors have debunked messages circulating on Whatsapp messenger and other social media that recommends a higher dose than is typically prescribed for malaria treatment. But then, some people resorted to taking overdoses of Chloroquine for cure and prevention and in no time, Nigerian Doctors reported cases of Chloroquine poisoning. Reports have it that over three deaths were recorded from overdoses of Chloroquine (CNN, Nigeria). Upon the misinformation that Chloroquine is the new found cure for COVID -19, the cost price of the drug became high due to increase in its demand. It must be stated that one of the drugs recommended for COVID-19 patients was hydrochloroquine but never Chloroquine.

Vitamin C Tablets Provides Immunity To COVID-19

No doubt, Vitamin C prevents damage to tissue in the body by neutralising free radicals which are charged particles that cause damage to cells and tissues and result in inflammation. Vitamin C is also known to protect against pathogens. However, there is no scientific proof that vitamin C can prevent people from contracting COVID-19 though there are trials being undertaken on the use of vitamin C among COVID-19 patients.

COVID -19 Affects Only The Elderly

There is the news flying around that it is only the elderly people with one underlying health condition or the other that can contract the virus. But as COVID-19 spread, more and more youth too and of course some elderly contracted the disease and died.

Coronavirus Pandemic Is A Cover For Gates Foundation To Implant Microchips

It is believed among some circles that information flooded Nigeria that attempts to test people for the virus is an excuse to implant Gates-funded microchips. This is false; the pandemic is real, the foundation refuted the claim, and experts say there is a medical reason for the way swabs are used when testing for the disease.

COVID -19 Vaccines Contain Microchip

Prior to the month Nigeria took delivery of the first batch of the COVID-19 vaccines, several narratives flooded the internet and one of them was that the vaccine contains microchips. Some people held the erroneous belief that the microchips were a ploy by the Federal Government to control the citizens. After some people have taken the vaccine, they claim that the site of the vaccination is magnetic and so, they have been injected with a substance.

Some Practical Critical Literacy Skills For Evaluating Information

The following practical steps will help the general public in combating the spate of misinformation in the public domain:

- i. Examine the address of the website from which the news is got so as to determine its authenticity or to know if it is from any official sources. Does it contain the word “gov” which signifies “government”?
- ii. Check for spelling and grammatical mistakes. Examine if the content are sensational. If any of these are found on the websites, then one needs to be guided.
- iii. Reflect on how much you know about the discourse. Seek the opinions of someone who might be more knowledgeable than you are on a particular issue. Better still, check accredited sources, including news media like the BBC and CCN.
- iv. Validate information across several sources. Double check specific details using one or more search engines and verify whether they appear on other websites, particularly on reputable media outlets. If these facts and figures are not reported elsewhere, or they sound unfamiliar, then, the information may not be fake.
- v. According to Digital experts, the use of Google Reverse Image Search helps to check the etiologies of photos. Doing this will give one the opportunity to identify all the websites where a photo has been published. One needs to examine extensively how the photo appears on the web and where they appeared.
- vi. Beyond Google which results are limited to the past, one needs to look beyond the first results on search engines like Google, which organises its results on the basis of what have been previously browsed and the popularity of websites. Also, one can use multiple search engines such as DuckDuckGo.
- vii. Make deliberate efforts to follow some individuals and organisations on social media as this will give you access to a wider and more diverse range of sources which would on the long run make it easier to spot misinformation.
- viii. Follow accredited media outlets such as the *Punch*, the *Vanguard*, and the *Tribune*. Despite their prejudices, distinguish their opinion pieces from news stories (Gianfranco, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how critical literacy could be applied in determining the authenticity of texts or news with particular reference to the misinformation on COVID-19 discourses in Nigeria. The major proposition of critical literacy is that every text, either spoken or written, carries the ideological imprints of the writer which the critical reader should unravel. In other words, the responsibility of decrypting the hidden meaning and intent of the writer now rests on the reader. The study shows that most of the respondents are hardly equipped with critical literacy skill as most of them believed almost all the news or misinformation about COVID -19 discourse without delving into the interests or ideological leanings of the news writer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Given the prominence of critical literacy, it should be at the epicenter of all educational curriculums. In fact, it should be made a school subject right from for elementary school through to the tertiary level of education.
- ii. In the same vein, parents should help their wards in acquiring critical literacy skills by guiding them to question the veracity of any trending online news and critical examine any material read.
- iii. Everyone should cultivate the habit of subjecting online news to the lenses of critical literacy, so as to spot misinformation when stumbled on.

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