VICTIMS OR HEROES? HOW DID JOURNALISTS FRAME THE EBOLA CRISIS IN LIBERIA?

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

STUDY RATIONALE
The Ebola Virus Disease epidemic in Liberia 2014-2015 made headlines worldwide with 10,800 cases and over 4800 deaths (CDC, 2016), causing fear and posing a challenge to traditional media. Individuals and communities rely on media to obtain health information, including decisions related to disease prevention and behavior to protect their health. Therefore, frames used by the media to report about health emergencies greatly impact public perceptions.

AIM
To assess the types of message frames utilized in Ebola-related communication in Liberia during the epidemic and evaluate the presence (or lack thereof) of risk communication best practices, so that lessons learned can be applied for future local, national, and global crises.

PUBLIC HEALTH CONTEXT
- The epidemic was unprecedented in scope, size, and areas of spread
- EVD claimed approximately 0.11% of Liberia’s civilian population, compared to 8.07% of its health care workers (doctors, nurses and midwives).
- Weak Public Health Infrastructure
  - Facilities with little or no personal protective equipment – not even gloves – and virtually no knowledge about how to use this equipment properly. Under such conditions, treatment of the first hospitalized patients ignited multiple chains of transmission, among staff, patients, and visitors, in ambulance and taxi drivers who ferried the sick to care, in relatives, neighbors, and eventually entire neighborhoods. Case numbers that had multiplied quickly began to grow exponentially (WHO, 2015).

EPIDEMIC TIMELINE
- March 30, 2014: 2 cases of EVD confirmed in Lofa County near Guinea’s border
- April 7, 2014: 10 deaths and 21 suspected and confirmed cases reported by Lofa County
- June 24: 51 cases reported nationwide (390 in Guinea & 158 in Sierra Leone)
- September 2014: 400-500 cases per week
- August 6, 2014: President Sirleaf declared a national state of emergency
- September – October, 2014: Arrival of foreign assistance from ECOWAS, U.S., Cuba, China, etc.
- January 16, 2015: Liberia declared Ebola-free by WHO with flare-ups

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MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Population: 4.6 million
Newspapers: 18 newspapers (9 dailies) – limited reach
Radio Stations: 16 (2 nationwide) – accessible to every Liberian
Television Stations: 6

METHODOLOGY

- Quantitative content analysis of randomly selected 745 newspaper articles and 182 audio files
- 3 major newspapers, 4 regular programming radio stations and 3 funded programming radio shows
- January 2014 through December 2015
- Theory-driven codebook developed
- Extensive training of 6 coders divided into 2 teams
- Intercooder reliability score Kt.85 across all teams

RESULTS

NEWSPAPERS

Journals frames of newspaper messages
Primary themes of newspaper messages

RADIO

Journalistic frames of radio messages
Primary themes of radio messages

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

- The four main journalistic frames differed between radio and newspapers. Radio emphasized behavioral steps while the press highlighted efficacy. A combination of both and focus on anti-stigmatizing messages are essential.
- Blame frames present in both channels partially linked to unverfied information.
- Behavioral steps had higher emphasis on radio than newspapers. The unprecedented nature of the epidemic warranted more efforts from both.

“...the messages about don’t touch the dead, wash your hands, if somebody is sick, leave them are all strange things, contrary to our tradition and culture.”

Increasing number of messages in radio and newspapers communicating compassion and empathy toward the end of the epidemic. Goal is to communicate both early on.

Messages need to focus on efficacy (self and response efficacy) for 2 reasons: empower people to seek treatment and increase belief in positive outcomes and own agency.

“Through the radio, people came to our aid. People also realized that Ebola was not on a death track, but that patients can recover from the disease. That led to more people seeking treatment and facilitated the dissemination of news in communities”

Dr. Jerry Brown, head of the Ebola Treatment Unit known as ELWA, Time magazine’s “Person of the Year 2014”

Health preparedness is key for media.

Forging partnerships with the public to increase trust between government and communities.

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