

REVIEW

AN EXAMINATION OF DENIALS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON COVID-19 IN THE NIGERIAN MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

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Abstract

From the first quarter of 2020, coronavirus (Covid-19) dominated our lives and media platforms, and it is considered an unprecedented healthcare crisis. The socio-economic, political and cultural impacts will last for a very long time. At present, the fight against Covid-19 is either being lost or won around the world. However, the virus may not disappear soon from Africa, particularly Nigeria, due to the tendency by people to deny its existence. Employing historicocritical and direct observation methods, this article reflects on the issue and signposts argument against claims that coronavirus is a fraud and a non-existent disease. Many unguarded Nigerians claim that Bill Gates is on the forefront of a plan to exterminate Africans through a vaccine. Others argue that if there was a coronavirus, it must have been prepared in a Chinese lab. They further claim that it is what China had in mind when it invented the 5G technology, which triggered the Covid-19. In fact, many Nigerians treat suggestions to wear facemasks or to apply certain preventive measures against infection from the virus with contempt. At each turn, Nigerians are pummelled with misinformation and disinformation. Readers and listeners are now expected to deal with news items that resemble the original. It is this situation that impels this study to take a position that a national orientation is required to correct a gullible culture of denial, propagation of fake news and the willingness of readers, listeners and other media users to accept such news as true without critical thinking. It is observed, regrettably, that the denials or conspiracy theories circulate more among students of tertiary institutions and degree holders who are supposed to have advance opinions on the issue. The article, therefore, suggests that deliberate national orientation campaigns should be done via available media and tertiary institutions' curricula should be reconfigured to give attention to this area of national life in Nigeria with a view to building a mass of critical thinkers, not 'zombies.'

Keywords: *Nigerian media ecosystem, conspiracy theory, Covid-19, denial, critical thinking, misinformation, disinformation, NUJ, NMA*

Introduction

The news one receives must satisfy certain criteria before it is accepted. It must be subjected to scrutiny or else it will pass as genuine if one is not careful. In the age of digitalism, one might be dealing with a news item that resembles the original when this is far from being the case. Humanity appears to have entered a phase of existence where anything is possible. Information and communication technologies' (ICTs') enabled media could be used to communicate falsehood as truth. For example, social media messages have been used to inform, misinform or disinform people, depending on the intentions of the purveyors. It may be so convincing that it could make people yield to its message. This is the shape a

conspiracy theory takes. Many conspiracy theories are unhealthy. They lead to strife and fuel hatred ethnic cleansing and, sometimes, genocides are traced to conspiracy theories.

Prooijen and Vugt (2018) assert that conspiracy theory is the conviction that a group of ‘actors’ meets in secret agreement with the purpose of attaining some malevolent goal. This aligns with Atkins’ (2009) view that denial is a refusal to believe in something or admit that something exists. The point is that both concepts have in the past negatively impacted the human condition (Arendt, 1958) that circumspection and critical thinking are required to navigate their vortexes. Transmitters of conspiracy theories are unconvinced by assertions tying individual progress to the trends of globalisation (Gulyas, 2016; Aaronovitch, 2010; Abalakina-paap, Walter, Craig, & Gregory, 1999). This is because disappointing results and disillusionment leave people with no hope. Hellinger (2019) agrees that the running of the affairs of the world justifies to an extent the beliefs of this set of people. In Eastern Europe, the targets are usually Jews and Russians. This, perhaps, explains why during the Covid-19 pandemic, among Nigerians, millions of educated people on social media denounced in strong terms acceptance of donations or buying of pharmaceutical products from the Chinese government, Chinese businessman Jack Ma, or from the American Bill Gates.

In the age of post truth, Barclay (2018) suggests that the receiver of a news item must do the extra work of ascertaining the credibility of the news. Authentic news is now competing with fake news in the digital age (Hodapp & Kannon, 2008; Konda, 2019). This is due to the different tricks employed by fake news peddlers. It is necessary because of the potential of the news causing one’s setback when the use of the information can alter one’s life considerably. Barclay (2018) offers tips on how to scrutinise news items. He discusses the intrigues and makes an illustration of how the agents of fake news indulge other readers or listeners to make them willing to accept a 1964 news item as current and genuine. He selects a news release by the Surgeon General of the United States, Mr. Luther Terry, for the exercise. The Surgeon General had made a compelling argument on the dangers of smoking in a 387-page book titled *Smoking and Health: Report of the Advisory Council to the Surgeon General of the United States*. There is a web of diseases woven around cigarette smoking, to make people understand how truly dangerous cigarette is (Barclay, 2018, p.14). He claims that several days later, those sympathetic to smoking will begin to speak through “heavily edited attack video in which US Public Health Service staff appear to admit that the surgeon general’s report is based on fake science and the connection between smoking and cancer is a complete fabrication” (Barclay, 2018, p. 14).

The video though discounted will be “visited over 500,000 times on *YouTube* while generating tens of thousands of disparaging comments from outraged smokers (Barclay, 2018, p. 14). Hellinger (2019, p. 21) agrees with the warning that conspiracy theories, when they pretend to fully explain major historical events and political turning points, can distract us from addressing larger social and economic forces that exacerbate the conditions that encourage conspiracies. It informs us why the Nigerians people sustained a ferocious war on the Chinese. Nigerians shared with relish fake news stories about the Chinese and some of their institutions. They claimed that there was a rejection of Chinese medical products by some countries because infections traced to Chinese products were growing by the day. A Nigerian online magazine, *Premium Times*, ran a story of the return of Chinese supplies by the Netherlands because the items were defective (Konda, 2019). Actually, Netherland’s authorities detected 40,000 faulty masks from the lot. It was explained by China as having been supplied by an unlicensed company. The Dutch were not unwise to have accepted replacements. Already, majority of the Nigerian social media community was unrelenting in the anti-Chinese push. It became the spiciest talking point at the onset of the pandemic in Nigeria.

Stories were packaged in videos by Nigerians who claimed to be reporting from their living rooms in Italy or in the United States of America (USA). One said he was reporting as someone who was present at the Italian airport when the consignment was brought down. According to him, the Italians asked the Chinese to keep those items after the things tested positive for the coronavirus. A similar story went viral that the Italians realised what terrible choice they had made in acceding to the presence of Chinese health workers, as Italy had even now been thrown into an avoidable spike in deaths due to the virus. The contrary was actually the case (Onyeji, 2020). The Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and

the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) joined the protest against the invitation of Chinese health officials to Nigeria. More than any other professional organ, the NMA ought to have warned the Nigerian government of the pandemic nature of the virus when the disease was ravaging Wuhan; the capital of Hubei Province in the Peoples Republic of China. Information should have been picked up from literature on the 1918-19 experience. In 1918-19, the whole world was in the grip of a flu pandemic that has the same characteristics as the Covid-19. Fatalities were quite high (O'Leary, 2012).

The NMA and NUJ petitions were built on similar information on the Netherlands and Italy. The NMA claimed that in a country with capable medical professionals such as its members, foreign medical personnel were not needed. In a country with a population of about 200 million being serviced by less than 100,000 medical doctors, it would be difficult to believe that a professional body of that standing could make such claims. Medical doctors in Kwara State picked up placards and rushed into the streets to protest against inviting Chinese health officials to fight the pandemic. Kano State eventually became the first state to fall victim to the inadequate supply of health officials and personal preventive equipment (PPE). Coordination and logistics of coronavirus care in that state broke down, as health workers were disoriented. There is no form of remorse from the NMA, a body that encouraged its members to join their compatriots overseas through its actions (Onyeji, 2020). The NMA had, therefore, entered a dangerous zone whereby medical doctors attempted publicly to damage the reputation of the profession by accusing their colleagues from China of evil intentions. What they had planted in the minds of Nigerians would affect the perception of Nigerians about the medical practice. This was taking place in a country where the attention one gets in any instance is tied to one's religion or ethnicity. The two organisations relied on fake news. The NMA's reaction to the Chinese presence is a residue of their treatment of their fellow medical doctors.

A Chinese company in Nigeria CCECC said it merely was using its contacts in China and some resources to support the local efforts in Nigeria, and that the Chinese health workers' brief would not go beyond advice and instructions on how to handle gadgets. The Chinese went through the humiliation of the Nigerian public being informed of a-14-day quarantine. If the Chinese were flying in a virus, why were the Nigerian Air Peace and Ethiopian Airlines aircraft personnel that brought in the cargo not contaminated? Would the Nigerian authorities be incapable of screening and detecting viruses? The Chinese and their equipment melted into thin air, but no talk about them. With the reported spike of the disease in Kano State, some people felt it was not out of the way to see a Chinese link. This was a time when many countries were placing various requests on the table of the Chinese (Onyeji, 2020). It is within this dynamic cusp that this article reflects critically on the claims and counter-claims of coronavirus' existence and the denials and conspiracy theories surrounding it in the Nigerian media ecosystem.

Media Report of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in Nigeria

Bill Gates, an American, was tagged a monster with a well-known plan through the vaccine he was championing, to exterminate Africans, if that would help in managing the earth's resources. It was claimed that the man was an advocate of the reduction in the world's population (Udoh, 2020). The accusers point to his obsession with Africa. Actually, Bill Gates and his former wife have taken it as a responsibility, using the Belinda and Gates Foundation to fight poverty and diseases in Africa. The foundation wrote off Nigeria's \$100m debt to Japan (Udoh, 2020). It worked hard to eliminate polio infection and polio-related deaths in northern Nigeria. Melinda Gates regularly visits communities in Africa where she adopts their methods of carrying clay pots of water on their heads from the stream as a way of identifying with locals. News reports of her contributions to the communities were kept away as that would defeat the purpose of the incident, which was drawing attention to the plight of Africans. The Melinda and Gates Foundation sent in \$1m to support Nigeria's coronavirus efforts. Outside Nigeria, Bill Gates was being roundly attacked. There was a high-profile addiction to the anti-Bill Gates campaign. Udoh (2020) reports that one Robert Kennedy Jnr. wrote a negative comment on Bill Gates. Melinda Gates had raised the alarm that there may be corpses on African streets if measures were not taken urgently to address the pandemic. That gave ammunition to her 'attackers' or 'traducers,' as it was seen as the climax of the scheming of the Gates. Without any empirical evidence, some said the death

she wished Africans would stop her from fulfilling her evil wish. Those people enjoyed seeing or reading news reports in which Bill Gates was physically attacked in Belgium. Pictorial reports of this unfortunate incident circulated with relish in the Nigerian media ecosystem.

Sceptics of the existence of a coronavirus kept the narrative going. If there was a virus, they said the virus must have been prepared in a Chinese lab. The intention they said so was to bring other nations down for Chinese ascendancy to take place. They claimed it was also what China had in mind when the Chinese invented the 5G technologies, which triggered the Covid-19. There were video recordings from sets of locations in Europe, Asia and America. The 5G phenomenon was mysterious and ghost-like. People who had been inside their homes because of lockdowns were shocked to come out to behold the robust 5G poles and masts. Reacting to the news 'Cuban Doctors Arrive in SA to Help Fight Covid-19 Spread' of 27 April 2020, 1:18am, some Nigerians said on Facebook: "So far they didn't cure C.O.S. (Kyari) we prefer Chinese doctors in 9ja. U can see their good results in Kano them no dey waste time." Sunday Nwankwo Nwoye wrote: "No be lie." Igwe Smart responded: "I tried so hard not to laugh but I couldn't pls forgive me." Nelson Chimezie's opinion was: "While the foolish ones are bringing in Chinese merchants of death" (posted 27 April 2020, 12:00). Interestingly, three months later, the infections peaked in South Africa (Nordling, 2020) amidst the mass of denials and conspiratorial tones.

In some videos that circulated in the Nigerian media ecosystem, it was observed that the 5G technology had come under attack, as somebody, with a burning pole in the background, would say that a new chapter had been opened against the forces of destruction in the world. He would name his brigade, saying they had no option but to declare war. In real life, there probably was no link between the person in the video and the burning pole. Yet, the attempt to convince people that there was nothing harmful about 5G was almost going to be a lost one. Grad (2020) opines that the huge point they had was their claim that Wuhan was the headquarters of the 5G technology. They said Nigeria must have nothing to do with a technology that had been banned by all countries of the world. The Nigerian government knew that rebuttals should not be left in the hands of non-government officials. Therefore, it came out to deny any 5G presence in Nigeria.

The 5G discourse stayed long on social media discussion platforms as the former American President, Donald Trump remarked that a Chinese 5G technology was not in the interest of America (Konda, 2019). America had not been talking about China in positive terms since China made a breakthrough with the 5G technology. America feared that technology would take China to unprecedented heights. The clash predates Wuhan. Cecco (2020) argues that a year before the virus got to America, the US government sought the extradition of an executive of Huawei, the company behind the 5G invention. America, in a case unrelated to 5G, accused Huawei of espionage and of selling products to Iran, a country that was under a trade embargo. As news of American Covid-19 fatalities kept coming out, US authorities announced they had uncovered unlawful Chinese activities in the US that involved US scientists who sold lab information to the Chinese. The Americans were arrested. It planted in the minds of the Nigerians everything they wanted to link 5G with the coronavirus. Nigerian Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy also built a robust argument against 5G (Egbunike, 2020). But, if 5G were responsible for the virus' outbreak, why was the virus contained in Wuhan while the 5G remained in the same Wuhan? Why were many Chinese cities hardly affected by the coronavirus even though many had 5G installations? America and many countries without 5G were curiously affected by the virus.

Nigeria's Reaction to the Covid-19

Many people in Nigeria insist that Covid-19 is fiction (Ukpe, 2020). While some say it is part of a grand design to depopulate Africa through a vaccine, others contend that 'blacks' are immune to the virus. Thus, they inadvertently promote racism, since racists have divided humankind into whites, yellows, reds and blacks. By the declaration, Africans (referred to as blacks) are deemed genetically different from the rest of humanity. However, these claimants are unable to put the American casualty figure in ethnic perspective even though they know that the US casualties were predominantly African

Americans. They claim that a top Nigerian government official, Abba Kyari, died from an ailment other than the officially-stated cause of death as coronavirus sickness. One suggested that the man was still alive, veiled to disguise himself. Others said the virus could not survive in the African sun. A lot of people were displeased at any hint that it was in their state of origin. People in the northern part of Nigeria wanted to correct the impression that it was in their states. Somebody said Kano State was imitating Lagos State in presenting false Covid-19 numbers. The Kogi State government said it was displeased at the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) for trying to blackmail the state with Covid-19 figures, maintaining there was nothing like a Corona virus in the state (Offiong, 2020). The mockery in Nigeria was disturbing. Covid-19 was changed to Covid-419. '419' is a code word for a fraudulent scheme. It is taken from the Nigerian criminal code 419. Some said they could not recall the central government ever saying the truth about anything.

This is just not the mindset needed to fight a pandemic. It was even more worrisome when governors and other highly placed officials appeared on TV with hordes of people, they ought to provide directions for, affirming what has already surfeited the social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, etc., in Nigeria. With such information overload of misinformation and disinformation, the Nigerian populace literally noted that the simplest explanation is that there is no coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. It was even more disturbing that the pictures and videos of events the young people watched on their smart phones included events elsewhere in the world. The federal and state governments thought it appropriate to prohibit public gatherings and to place lockdowns all over the country, advising people of the benefits of wearing facemasks. Shockingly, government officials defied the same orders. Abba Kyari's corpse was not handed over to the state nor was it cremated. The corpse travelled over 800 kilometres to a burial site, with several officials milling around the grave. If we remove the pallbearers in their white overalls; it looked like a normal burial ceremony (Adebowale, 2020). In fact, the video of one of the pallbearers who pulled off his white clothes by the roadside went viral on the social media. With an endless list of violations, the question is, whose job was it to serve as role models to the people?

Mosques and churches refused to cooperate with the order, even as Mecca, Rome and Jerusalem had gone beyond that line of argument. Pastor Oyedepo of Winners Chapel International, with branches in over 300 cities in the world, questioned the directive, saying his church would not suspend services. This was in the heat of news of a pastor in the US who dared the virus and was claimed by the same virus (Egbunike, 2020). Oyedepo was forced to change his mind when the virus started to ravage Nigerians. Nationwide, the size of members in churches never diminished in the smaller churches. Many pastors switched to vigils in their apartments. They mostly prayed that the coronavirus be tamed. Ayeni (2020) informs that Easter was suspended in the Vatican, but not in, for instance, Bayelsa State in Nigeria, where the governor thought it wise to allow worship on Easter, for people to pray away the sins of the state. Two weeks later, the governor was rattled by news of doctors and nurses in the state's preeminent hospital physically running away from duty to avoid contact with a patient with symptoms of the virus. Sadly, the woman had no travel history. Therefore, the virus quickly spread in a nightmarish way among the populace.

The stay-at-home order was literally ignored nationwide due to some reasons. It was ignored because many people in Nigeria feed on daily efforts on the streets; some walking the streets with wares. Many would have loved to stay at home, but if only what the government said about providing them with relief was true. Many people refused to stay indoors because of the assurances from sceptics about the non-existence of a coronavirus. If people were succumbing to the virus, it was good, in their views, to see how selective karma was, as only the names of prominent people kept coming up. People waited for the disease to wipe out their bad leaders before taking exit (Nwaubani, 2020; Galindo, 2020). Habitually, people moved out. Multitudes of them could set upon trucks conveying rice, or vans delivering bread, and people dragging out bags of rice. People had seen many scenes to be worried. Galindo (2020) informs that Moslems congregated on the streets and protested against government's attempt to prevent them from praying. An Imam was relieved of his job for failing to call for prayers. In that case, he had two masters. In various parts of Nigeria, people played games with the same set of people; exchanged family visits and hardly did anything differently. Sceptics were still active on the

social media, passing round news of relaxation of lockdowns in Ghana and Europe, failing to report that stricter measures had been taken in those places, and that the governments did not work alone.

Although lethal, the Covid-19 can be neutralised by numerous tropical herbs. The list of remedies is long. Heat, especially sunlight, kills it. Disinfectants, detergent soap as well as bleach destroy it (Ukpe, 2020). In addition, Nigerians were given advice on personal hygiene such as washing hands regularly, washing apparels once they entered their apartments and to isolate temporarily, and anything they brought home that may have been touched by outsiders. If possible, they were advised to use disinfectants to scrub the floor. Eyeglasses and facemasks were recommended, while physical contact between people was discouraged. Drinking water regularly to moisten the throat was advised. Preferable was hot water and hot drinks. People chewed ginger and used orange peels, lemon, onion, garlic, hibiscus, tea leaf, among other herbs. When boiled together the drink flushed out the virus, as it was believed the virus attached itself to the walls of the throat, grew, destroyed the immune system of the victim and also choked the victim to death. Vitamin C was, therefore, recommended to build the immune system; just as adequate sleep was required. Those were home remedies in the absence of medical treatment. The governor of Oyo State, Seyi Makinde, said he got cured by regular intake of honey and black seed oil when he tested positive. In medical centres, the ventilator was used to pass air into the lungs while the patient was on treatment (Ukpe, 2020).

Seizing on the hopes of the local remedies, many educated people started chanting that Nigeria should shun foreign methods and rely on homegrown measures. They asserted that Africa had failed because of reliance on foreign ideas. Should the Director-General (DG) of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) listen to such people, he would not have sent out appeals for testing kits to be bought from reliable manufacturers, among them a Chinese firm. If it was true, then Africa should not have embraced technologies such as 4G, the internet, cars and Western education. Herbs pass through clinical tests and are processed as capsules and tablets. The same educated people condemned lockdowns and social distancing (Ukpe, 2020). With the benefit of hindsight, the NCDC DG's decision was a wise one because the situation would have been worse when the virus infections peaked in Nigeria.

The Chinese government over the years used Chinese students to steal the technologies and secrets of countries overseas. These students combined efforts with locally-trained Chinese to put the country where it is today. This is a workable, inward-looking strategy. It was probably the inward-looking culture in Nigeria that was responsible for the hostility toward the Chinese, Bill Gates and Jack Ma. No country is an island. No country can practice nation-distancing. Social distancing and lockdowns were the winning formulas for Ghana and all countries that are counting gains in the face of the pandemic (Nordling, 2020). Many people in Nigeria have this unhelpful attitude because shame is not talked about. There is general unfeeling of the rulers and the led, corruption, poor education and lack of research (Ogunbowale, 2016). It is honourable to admit one's wrongs. Whoever holds up these values will be well guided before committing any kind of mischief. The Nigerian government and the people have little regard for rules of engagement. That is why the government can renege on its promises and still conduct business without any hint of remorse. It is bad that the government never apologised for leaving entry points to the country open for an unspeakable length of time. Yet, in news flashes, government officials vow to protect the citizens from the virus (Nwaubani, 2020). If they had known their past actions would have disqualified them from authoritatively making public pronouncements, they would have saved the society the pain everybody went through.

Conclusion

This article has examined denials and conspiracy theories on Covid-19 in the Nigerian media ecosystem. It noted the credulity of most Nigerians, especially the youths and called for a deliberate effort towards building a mass of critical thinkers among them, using available media channels in Nigeria. It regretted that if a majority of the people in Nigeria would amuse themselves with a serious issue as a pandemic, then it must be admitted that the country's values have considerably deteriorated. Many Nigerians failed to empathise with people who were losing their family members or falling sick as a result of Covid-19. People put up various pranks and lies to show that Covid-19 was unreal. They were prepared to believe

stories that were unfit to be displayed for public consumption. When their lives were not in danger, being young people whose immune system had been said to withstand the virus, they cared less if the rest of the older people did not outlive the pandemic. The denials and conspiracies may have been covers for their sadism. This is something that must be brought under control as much as the country wants to bring the pandemic under control. The callousness of the young people has been brought to the fore too. They proudly exhibited their non-compliance with instructions on how to check the spread of the virus. The country that is famous for a lot of negativities cannot afford to add this growing problem. Religious leaders, educational institutions, particularly tertiary school must elevate this issue to national discourse. It is true that religious leaders are at the centre of these doubts and pessimism about the virus, but they must be made to take another look at the problem as the country fashions out a way to grow a mass of critical thinkers.

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