AJ ACADEMIC JOURNALS

Journal of Media and Communication Studies

Full Length Research Paper

Media and disaster management: Analysing communication trends in flood ravaged communities in Benue State, North Central Nigeria

Muritala O. Oke[1*], Afolabi T. Adeyinka[2] and Oshinfowokan Grace Oluseyi[3]

[1]Directorate of Research, National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.
[2]Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic Bauchi, off Dass Road Gwallameji, Bauchi, Nigeria.
[3]Department of Political Science, National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, Jos, Nigeria.

The need to communicate early and frequently with multiple stakeholders is to ensure effective communication towards enhanced preparedness and response efforts in order to reduce disaster fatality rate. The media are critical stakeholders in disaster management as their contents create awareness and educate people in building resilience, reducing disaster risk and vulnerability in pre, during and after disaster. This study analyses the trends of communicating disaster information by the media to establish the existence of departure from the media not living up to its social responsibility role of informing and educating the public and to find out to what extent disaster awareness is communicated to communities to understand the effect of media messages on the community. This study adopted survey method with questionnaire developed and distributed to one hundred and twenty respondents in six communities in Benue State living close to flooded area- New Kanshio Village, Rice Mill Wadata, Idye Village, Achusa Village and Wurukum Village. The study disagrees with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) (2009) assertion that disaster awareness is low in the developing countries. The result affirm that disaster information are delivered through radio and television and little attention was paid to the use of community-based disaster risk management approach that involve use of informal communication channels such as town hall meetings, community based seminars. However, timely and frequent sympathy message from various stakeholders dominated the media content, which is more top–bottom approach and not totally understood by the rural inhabitants, probably leading to high victims' level. The paper concluded that community-based communication process using communication forms such as interpersonal, seminar, town hall meeting should be used in creating disaster awareness and to complement effort of the media.

Key words: media, disaster management, communication trends, community-based communication process, disaster information.

INTRODUCTION

Disasters can be classified as natural disasters, technological disasters, or complex emergencies (UNISDR, 2009). When disaster occurs, affected people are always in disarray during and after a disaster,

*Corresponding author. E-mail: moadio37@gmail.com.

however, and perhaps if effective communication has been in place, preparedness and response efforts will not only reduce fatality rate, it will diminish secondary morbidity (Sellnow et al, 2012). Organizations must communicate early and frequently with multiple stakeholders to prevent panic and implement an orderly response plan (Perko, 2011). The government, decision-makers and stakeholders need to know what efforts are on-going, and what type of further assistance is available to coordinate relief. The public deserves information such as where to obtain assistance, what on-going personal risks they face, and how they can protect themselves and their families (Rubin et al., 2011). In the case of disaster information, early warning systems, local community engagement is crucial in reducing fatality as a result of disaster. Thus, to achieve sustainable disaster management, communicating at the right and appropriate time to the communities will reduce their vulnerabilities and serves as starting point for local system development (Capistrano and Singh, 2012).

Media effort is, therefore, critical in disaster management, as its contents create awareness and educate people. Its effort has assisted in building resilience, reducing disaster risk and vulnerability. According to the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) (2009), involvement of the media is needed in the three stages of disaster management - pre, during and after disaster. UNISDR (2009) argued that presently focus of disaster management organisation and media is mainly on during and after disaster.

Research findings have shown that the media in Nigeria have failed to bring environmental issues sufficiently and the danger it portends to the public domain. It has also not efficiently carried out its social responsibility roles of informing, educating and mobilising the public for actions that can engender sustainable development (Ebagare and Anyanwu, 2011; Nwanne, 2013). However, this study analyses the trends of communicating disaster information by the media, to establish the existence of departure from the media not living up to its social responsibility role of informing, educating and mobilising the public toward reducing natural disaster. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to find out to what extent disaster awareness is communicated to rural dwellers; and to understand the effect of disaster messages on the community.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Media and disaster management

According to Raufu (2003: 8), "mass media are the modern means of giving information to a large number of people". The modern mass media include newspapers, magazine, radio, television, internet, etc. However, in relation to rural community, Ebagare and Anyanwu (2011: 50) describe community media as publications or broadcast outfits which serve the needs of those who make up a community. Community media brings media close to the rural people, feel the people's heart beat and therefore is better placed to advocate solutions. The media must be perceived to be part and parcel of a community to enable the people to relate well with them and possibly benefit from them. At the moment, community media is been used to mobilize the rural populace for participation in the political process (Okoye, 2008: 267). Moemeke (1989) argued that rural media should be used to sensitise and mobilise rural populace on disaster-related issues.

Communication trends

The use of all forms of communication arts to transmit essential knowledge to wider community is especially appreciated in the informal settings of assemblies, and special events (Bhattia, 2006). This can take many forms, offering fun and engaging ways to introduce important knowledge, skills and competencies for all ages. Dissemination of written materials, and uses of posters and signage are important ways to share disaster risk reduction messages. Creative educational materials, whether toys and games, documentary and short videos, storybooks, comic books, puzzles, and computer games also can be creative ways to transmit awareness and knowledge. Cultural and performing arts, whether music, song, poetry, dance, puppetry, magic, street theatre, improvisation, pantomime, or artwork are creative ways to introduce disaster risk reduction messages. Setting up of "safety clubs", scouting badges, and project activities can develop interest and leadership among children. These provide an opportunity to develop awareness materials and displays, plan games and engage in performances and art projects to communicate with others. Small-scale models including, for example, shake table demonstrations are also powerful hands-on tools. Projects that bring the media into contact with local community and local government and community-service oriented clubs have been shown to be extremely effective for disaster reduction (Schick, 2007). These practical efforts help to develop populace analytic and problem-solving skills, as they research and identify hazards, tap into indigenous knowledge, oral history, public information, and scientific research and expertise to assess risks and identify solutions. Competitions, awards and commendations generate community and mass media interest and develop enthusiasm for the messages.

Community education and disaster management

Community has a great deal of local experience and

local knowledge of disaster. Historical local disaster prevention methods were passed on to other family/community members through daily activity (Takeuchi et al., 2011). However, the characteristics of disasters have changed due to climate change, thus necessitating that people now need to prepare for disasters of which they have no experience and about which they have difficulty in obtaining information. It is thus necessary for communities and families to know different scenarios of disaster (Takeuchi et al., 2011). Bongo (2010) stressed the gaps in the integration and linking of disaster-related information with the community level. He opined that, for effective community level dissemination of disaster information, there is a need for streamlining the 'jargon' used in the media as it impedes communication strategies to communities. He argued that communities should be given the opportunity to formulate and develop their own disaster communication strategies based on experience and adaptation strategies for community resilience. Thus, capacity building of community-level disaster management committees and institutional arrangements must be enhanced (Bongo, 2010). Capacities should be built on usage of portable satellite communication technology that would enable local communities to be better equipped and respond faster to disaster situations (Bharti, 2008).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on agenda setting theory by McComb and Shaw (1972) and social responsibility theory by Siebert et al. (1956). Agenda setting theory describe a very powerful influence of the media to inject on the public mind issues that are important. This study presupposes that mass media should bring more disaster issues to the public domain especially rural area. This will create more awareness and provoke disaster resilience. According to Dominick (1996), the social responsibility theory emphasises the responsibilities of the media to the society by adequately reporting balanced news on all public affairs, and giving voice to the voiceless. The theory is operationalized from the perspective that environmental disaster constitute serious threat to society's wellbeing and the media can avert disaster by making pre-disaster information available to the vulnerable communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted survey research method with open-ended questionnaire developed and distributed to one hundred and twenty respondents in six flood ravaged communities in Benue State. Purposive sampling was used to select 120 respondents who were the victims of flood disaster from New Kanshio village, Rice Mill Wadata, Idye village, Achusa village and Wurukum village, Welfare quarters in Guma local government of Benue State. The respondents which are mostly traders, artisans, civil servants and farmers are culled from population of 262,100 of the Guma local government. Out of the respondents, a total of 107 questionnaire were returned which reflects 89% response rate. Questionnaires collated from the field were quantitatively analysed with the use of descriptive statistics. Statistics were expressed in frequencies and percentages and presented in the table.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic socio-economic characteristics of the respondents show that more men responded to our questionnaire than women. Also, more married people showed willingness to respond than all other marital status. This could be because they are looking for ways to voice out their concern and solve the problem at hand. The age of the respondents revealed that most of them were within age 30-39 years, the age of very strong men, willing to work but being impeded by the flood that took place. Data on academic qualification shows that the respondents were mostly secondary school leavers looking for admission into higher institutions or cutting some jobs in the farm or fishing for survival (Table 1).

Trends of media communication on disaster management in Benue State

The result presented in Table 2 revealed that the respondents had experienced natural and man-made disaster in their life. Specifically, more respondents had experienced flood disaster than fire outbreak and riots. Most of the respondents, as evident in Table 3, agreed that they were aware of the disaster prior to occurrence. This disagrees with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) (2009) that disaster awareness is low in the developing countries. However, when further analysis was made on the medium at which disaster information is passed, result from Figure 1 affirms that most disaster information in Nigeria is delivered through radio and television. Little attention was paid to the use of community-based disaster risk management approach that involves use of town hall meetings and community based seminars.

The concentration on the use of television and radio to a large extent allow the use of jargon, which Bongo (2010) advocated against. Rather the use of 'jargon' could be replaced utilization of simple words or proverbs that can elicit better understanding by the community. This can only be done when information is passed more at community meeting and seminar rather than formalised setting like newspaper and radio/television platform. Also, since communities members are aware that there might be occurrence of disaster, better disaster management information need to have been passed to the likely to be affected communities. This can aid formulation of community disaster strategies based on their experience and adaptation thereby strengthening the community

Table 1. Demographic socio-economic characteristic of respondents.

Sex	
Male	67.29% (72)
Female	32.71% (35)
Marital status	
Single	20.56% (22)
Married	58.87% (63)
Divorced	9.34% (10)
Widow/Widower	11.21% (12)
Age	
20-29	13.08% (14)
30-39	39.25% (42)
40-49	20.56% (22)
50-59	25.23% (27)
60 above	1.86% (2)
Educational backgroud	
Primary Leaving Certificate	19.62% (21)
Adult Education	11.21% (12)
Secondary Education	44.85% (48)
National Diploma	14.95% (16)
Higher National Diploma	9.34% (10)
Major occupation of the respondents	
Trader	33.64% (36)
Artisan	14.95% (16)
Civil Servant	10.28% (11)
Farmer	41.12% (44)

Source: Field survey 2018.

Table 2. Kind of disaster experienced**.**

Natural	
Flood Disaster	75.70% (81)
Man made	
Fire outbreak	6.56% (7)
Riots	17.75% (19)

Source: Field Survey 2017.

Table 3. Community awareness of the disaster prior to its occurrence.

Is your community aware of the disaster prior to its occurrence	Yes	80.37%
	No	19.62%

resilience. Furthermore, the community disaster strategies can be strengthened by building the capacity building of community level disaster management committees and integrate such into local government or state government
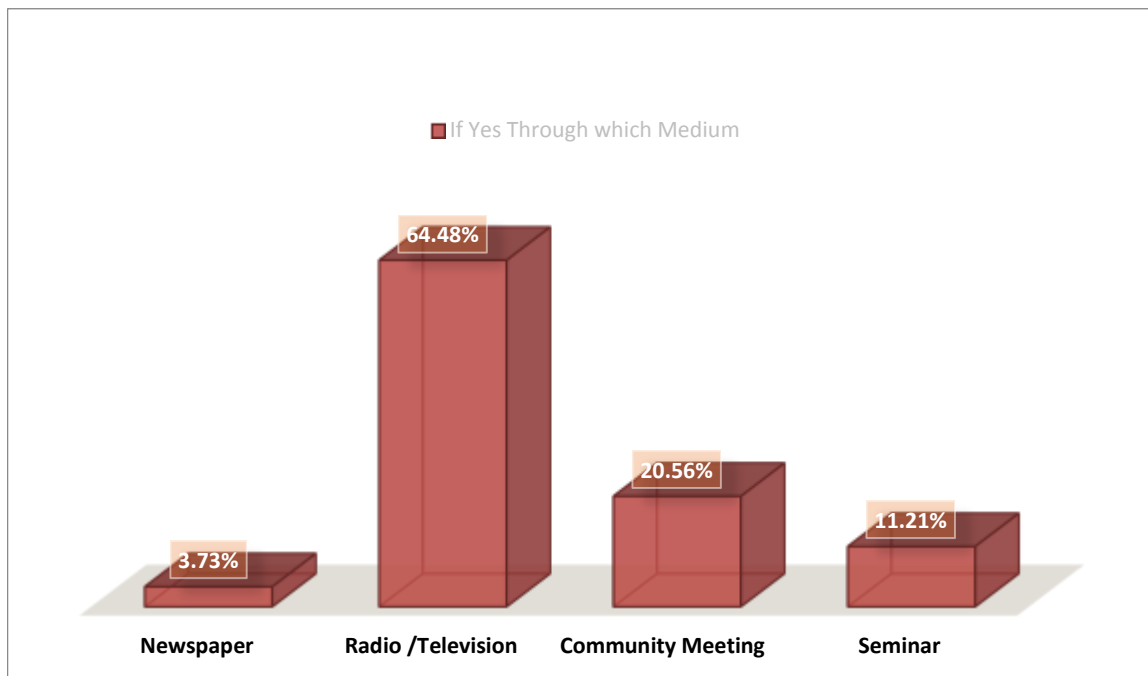
Figure 1. Medium at which disaster information is passed.

Table 4. Media messages community were exposed to:

What are the media messages exposed to, by your community during the disaster?	
(1) Timely and frequent sympathy messages from various stakeholders through the media	66.35%
(2) Inter-personal communication from stake holders at internally-displaced people (IDP) centres	18.69
(3) Government initiate relief effort to restore hope to the community	14.95

institutional arrangements (Bongo, 2010).

However, when considering the kind of messages media pushed to the community during the disaster, the respondents' responses in Table 4 show that timely and frequent sympathy message from various stakeholders dominated the media content. These messages are type of top–bottom approach to communication dissemination that is purely urban- based and may not be in the form understood by the rural populace who were affected by the flood. Other responses were inter-personal sympathy communication from stakeholders like visitation to internally-displaced people (IDP) centres as well as visitation and provision of relief material to the affected victims. The implication of data is that community based communication process should be given more attention. This, we argued, that the information gotten through radio/television, could have reduced the number of the victims of the flood disaster, if the community based disaster strategies, using communication process such as interpersonal, seminar, town hall meeting are in place, to complement effort of the media.

Conclusions

The study disagrees with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) (2009) assertion that disaster awareness is low in the developing countries. The result affirms that disaster information are delivered more through radio and television while little attention was paid to the use of community-based disaster risk management approach which involves use of informal communication channels such as town hall meetings, community-based seminars.

However, in line with Bongo (2010) the kind of communication required to link disaster-related information with the community level must be such that streamlining the use of 'jargon' and instead replace it with simple words or proverbs understood by the community. This can only be possible if the likely to be affected communities are mobilised to be involved in the formulation and development of their own disaster communication strategies based on experience and adaptation for community resilience.

Furthermore, relying only on the disaster information from television and radio may not motivate the victims to take urgent action. This is because disaster information from television and radio may be considered general compared to when such information is obtained at the community meeting, and probably delivered in their local language.

Moreover, the idea of timely and frequent sympathy message from various stakeholders which dominated the media content is top-bottom approach and shows that the post disaster information is still lacking in the country. It is the opinion of this paper that this perhaps could account for the reason why the flood victims was unable to learn from past events and so may fall victim next time.

This paper concludes that community based-communication process using communication forms such as interpersonal, seminar, town-hall meeting should be used in creating disaster awareness and to complement effort of the media. Effort should be geared toward development of appropriate post-disaster information strategy like lessons learnt from the perspective of the victims. This approach will strengthen pre-disaster information material that should serve in the overall disaster prevention programme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that more disaster information should be delivered through radio and television perhaps using local dialect. However, to achieve more impact at the community level, the Nigeria Emergency Manage-ment Agency as well as her State and Local Government counterparts should develop community-based disaster risk management that would involve use of informal communication channels such as town hall meetings, community-based seminars etc. Part of the strategies to be deployed should be to involve the communities likely to be affected in the formulation and development of their own disaster communication strategies based on experience, and resilience developed as a result of disaster in the community. As part of the broad community-based disaster information management to be developed, post disaster information must be such that will gather experiences from local community and package as post disaster education packages in local dialects as a way of reducing the victims' exposure to disaster. It is also recommended that capacity building

programme should be organised for the selected community level disaster management members that will be involved and deployed especially on the use of portable satellite communication technology that would enable local communities to respond faster to disaster situations. It is recommended that community-based communication process using communication forms such as interpersonal, seminar, town hall meeting should be used in creating disaster awareness and to complement effort of the TV and radio stations being used presently.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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