

Politics and Media: The Covid-19 Pandemic and its Discursive Public

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Abstract

Public communication about the Covid-19 pandemic occurred at the intersection between the media and politics. The two realms, politics and media, have been critical in what the public has been given as ‘information’ about the pandemic in its evolution globally. This barrage of conflicting information ranges from the cause/s of the pandemic, its signs and symptoms, its side effects, its prevention and control measures, its purported cure/s, its vaccines, and its variants. As a result, a great deal of misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda has been put across to the unwitting public. Media have been the channel of this problematic barrage of the public’s information about the pandemic. In a democracy, media constitute an arena for public deliberation and debate called the public sphere. However, we argue that in the case of the pandemic, mediated communication has potentially been susceptible and vulnerable to misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. The overabundance of information about the pandemic in the media is termed infodemic. As vehicles of the infodemic, media have become a conduit for advancing a monological or one-sided view of the pandemic. Consequently, alternative interpretations (or unorthodox views) of the pandemic have been elided, summarily dismissed, or silenced, leading to the monological view about the pandemic, thereby generating what we characterise as ‘pandemic epistemicide.’ This epistemicide, we argue further, has exacerbated what we coin as ‘manufactured mass ignorance’ about the pandemic, leading to global vaccine hesitancy.

Keywords

Mis/dis-information, Conspiracy Theories, Infodemic, Monological Perspective

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Introduction

The study explores public communication practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. This particular communication genre occurs at the intersection between media and politics in what is conceptualised as the public sphere of democracy. The paper argues that crisis communication has generally been false, inaccurate, ambiguous and unhelpful for the anxiety-ridden and distressed publics for sound health decision-making. Furthermore, the public has been bombarded with too much information, making it hard to process and utilise useful information for sound health decision-making. Instead of democratising (i.e. widening) the space for public communication, the Internet and social media --the virtual sphere – have fallen to extreme abuse and exacerbated the situation by operating as a conduit for monological or one-sided views about the pandemic. This, we argue, has led to ‘pandemic epistemicide,’ i.e. the deliberate exclusion of competing perspectives. Furthermore, we argue that this epistemicide has resulted in ‘manufactured mass ignorance’ vis-à-vis the Covid-19 pandemic.

The paper is laid out as follows: Section 1 reviews the extant literature on the intersection between media and politics, drawing mainly on traditional and contemporary public sphere theory. Section 2 examines the public communication phenomena of, among other things, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories about the pandemic. Finally, section 3 argues that due to the abovementioned communication, public discourse on the pandemic--as mediated by both mainstream and online media--was one-sided and promoted a monological perspective to the pandemic, thereby eclipsing alternative interpretations or unorthodox views.

The Media as a Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas (1989) argues that deliberation in a democracy –i.e. deliberative democracy--takes place in a public sphere. Nancy Fraser (1990) understands Habermas as defining the public sphere as “the informally mobilised body of nongovernmental discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to

the state” (Fraser, 1990, p.75). Habermas further argues that media are an essential organ of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Thompson, 1995; 2005; Mwale, 2012, pp. xviii, 22, 240, 248). Consequently, media are sometimes considered the public sphere (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). Necessarily, media and politics intersect in the public sphere of democracy. Therefore, the media are an integral component of a democracy considered ideally healthy.

Significantly, the media report and represent issues at stake in society. More importantly, the press educates people about complex issues. For example, for DeSilva *et al.*, “The print media are important vehicles for communicating information about health risks because people formulate their impressions of risks based on media reports and because the media are the most economical vehicle for risk education” (DeSilva *et al.*, 2004, p.32). Most importantly, within the journalistic practice, the media are expected to be facilitators of public deliberation in general and provocateurs of public debate in particular (Berger, 2005). In other words, professionally, journalists are expected to probe issues beneath the surface in their news reporting. Necessarily, democracy requires vibrant media.

Capabilities of the media in the public sphere of democracy

Mwale (2012) observes that the media have at least two main capabilities regarding public communication practices, such as the public debate on science and technology. First, the media give voice to a diversity of views on an issue, thereby providing media space for conflict in debate to play out. By giving voice to diverse perspectives, the media satisfy the democratic requirement of all-inclusiveness in debate in the public sphere (Mwale, 2012, p.248). However, this requirement is generally not strictly adhered to in journalistic practice. As a result, some voices are not heard outside the media space (Mwale, 2012, p.249).

As an essential organ of the public sphere, media does not fully meet democracy’s requirement for all-inclusiveness for citizen participation in politics and this is worrisome. According to Fraser (1990), the Habermasian public sphere is inherently exclusionary and marginalising of specific segments of the

population, most especially women of all classes and ethnicities, men and women of racialized ethnicities, and plebeian men (Fraser, 1990, p.62). Fraser argues for participatory parity in the public sphere of democracy today. For Fraser, citing revisionist historiography, despite the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility, the official public sphere rested on, indeed, was significantly constituted by several significant exclusions, the critical axis of exclusion being gender (Fraser, 1990, p.59).

Today, in the 21st century, vis-à-vis the issue of participatory parity that Fraser wants in the public sphere of democracy, we can add the youth, the unemployed, the poor, peasants to her list of excluded and marginalised segments, refugees, and asylum seekers, among others. Fraser posits subaltern counter-publics as a possible counterweight to the official and dominant publics in stratified (inegalitarian) societies. Thus, subaltern counter-publics (e.g. elite women's publics) stand in a conflictual and contestatory relationship to dominant (e.g. bourgeois white male-dominated) publics in stratified societies (Fraser, 1990, p.70). Fraser points out that due to subaltern counter-publics in Western stratified societies, the Habermasian liberal public sphere was always constituted by conflict and contestation to challenge the hegemonic dominance of the ruling bourgeois class (Fraser, 1990, p.62).

The second central capability of the media is that they can surface some 'truth-interest' paradoxical relationship of a region or continent to science and technology (Mwale, 2012, p.249). In this case, health science and technology are tailored to preventing and controlling the Covid-19 pandemic. The 'truth-interest' paradox arises in public debate on science and technology, such as Covid-19 pandemic-related health science and technology because orthodox scientific voices intend and try to disseminate their research's truth or purported facts, findings and observations. However, there are interested parties in public debate on science and technology, including the Covid-19 pandemic-related health science and technology. These interested parties intend and try to set and promote their

own (non-scientific) agenda, which tends to be largely socio-cultural and politico-economic.

Mwale (2012) observes that media can operate as active mediators of public communication practices –i.e. they can *mediate*- without necessarily enabling critical engagement of issues. This rendering of active mediation as mediation marks a fundamental shift from the Habermasian-based ideal in which active mediation would have to be wedded to critical engagement, higher level articulation of the complexity of issues at stake, public opinion formation, and resolution of the debate. The Habermasian-based ideal expects journalistic control for discussion to enable active mediation involving contentious debate and dialogical communication. However, Mwale (2012)'s study (on public debate on GM maize in the media) did not manifest such an expectation in the public sphere of Southern Africa.

The media can be the watchdog for the people, protecting the public interest, giving voice or audibility and visibility to otherwise excluded and marginalised, vulnerable, subaltern, or minority groupings, thereby curbing authoritarianism and state absolutism as well as limiting the excesses of popular democracy such as democratic centralism, elitism, and majoritarianism, which are often reinforced by hegemonic political party structures and practices (Groteau and Hoynes, 2001; Mwale, 2012, p.250). Ideally, in the classical liberal public sphere, the media can operate as a watchdog and take on the role of “the fourth estate” (Habermas, 1989, p.60). Whether in the short- or long-term, the media-cum-the fourth estate can step in assuming some of the functions of official political opposition. Sometimes the media can even operate as an organ of the political opposition, especially when it (the official political opposition) is relatively weak, disorderly and disorganised (Mwale, 2012, p.250).

Public agenda setting by the media

In the bygone era of mass media dominance (i.e. in the second half of the 20th century), media effects theory asserted that what the media determined

as necessary is what the public regarded as important. Media effects theorists argued then that the media set the agenda for the people by prioritising specific issues over others in society (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Perse, 2001; Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.68). However, despite this capacity on the part of the media to determine what information is essential for public consumption, media effects theory conceded that media could not change the public's attitudes. The media cannot tell people what to think, but rather, media can only tell people what to think about (Cohen, 1963; Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.68). Early formulations of agenda-setting theory found a high similarity across the news sources surveyed then. This suggested to the theorists that mass media tends to develop a shared understanding of what is newsworthy and what are critical public issues. The mass media fraternity judges what events and stories have 'news value' and are worth publishing as news.

At first, the advent of the Internet and social media seemed to offset and weaken the agenda-setting power of established press because of its "potential to fragment audiences across myriad diverse sites" (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.68). Nonetheless, recent research has shown that mainstream or legacy news media still dominate audiences in the online environment, observing further that there is a high degree of uniformity of agendas across the varieties of media today (McCombs, 2005, p.545). This means that mainstream media continue to set the agenda for public deliberation and debate in the public sphere of democracy despite the introduction of the Internet and social media.

Dearing and Rogers (1996) define agenda-setting as an inherently political process, an ongoing contest between issue proponents to gain political attention through the media, often to influence policy. An issue is synonymous with a social problem linked to politics through the potential for policy intervention or government action and is often the focus of conflicting views. Therefore, it can be called a societal issue (Dearing and Rogers, 1996, p.3; Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.68). The agenda-setting power of the media highlights the political nature of the role of the media in society. Particularly in a democratic society, the media's

primary function is to render visible and audible to everyone across the various population strata.

Despite its potency to explain the power of the media in setting the agenda for public deliberation and debate, agenda-setting research has been complicated by the rise of social networks as distributors of information and opinion. It must be noted that agenda-setting does not separate ‘news’ from ‘opinion’ (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.69). The agenda-setting effect was premised on journalism as a closed shop. Such old-school journalism took for granted the gatekeeping function of media managers such as editors, who had power over what enters into media as a societal issue (Shoemaker, 1991). However, today in the Internet and social media age, multiple competing sources can set the news agenda for the public. Thus, it is unclear today how analysis and opinion are produced in numerous contemporary media.

Beyond media effects and agenda-setting theory, the role of journalism in the public sphere has attracted its unique scholarship lately. Scholars have examined how journalism is connected to ideas of the public sphere and how the media align their role in relation to that norm. Premised on the assumption that the public sphere is a social imaginary --an implicit symbolic matrix that is in itself enabling within which people to imagine and act as a ‘world-making collective’ (Gaonkar, 2002, p.1)--, it is argued that journalists connect imaginatively to the world through the ideas of their professional role. Journalists’ professional imagination defines the collective potential of agency inherent in journalists’ professional culture (Kunelius and Ruusunoksa, 2008, p.663; Cowling and Mwale, 2020, pp.69-70). Journalists’ professional imagination connects them to larger social imaginaries such as the nation-state, democracy and the public sphere, henceforth linking them collectively to other members of society. Journalists’ professional imagination further provides journalists with a professional identity that relates journalism practice close to the idea of the public interest, in the process engendering the belief that journalists’ primary role is to serve the public by holding influential individuals and state authorities in society accountable, thereby helping the public

interest (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.70). To McQuail (1992), media managers are guided by the ‘public interest’ in determining what is newsworthy among the information reporters gather in their media houses (McQuail, 1992).

Publics and counter-publics created by the media

Not only is media power grounded in agenda-setting and in serving the public interest, but the media also can create publics. Michael Warner (2002) defines publics as an imaginative relationship between strangers made in relation to a circulating text or discourse. For Warner, the public can, for example, be a group of citizens reading a reputable newspaper, individuals on an alternative website, or individuals following a hashtag on Twitter or any other social media platform. Individuals who form a public need not know each other personally, nor need they share a geographic space like a city, region, or country. Individuals on an alternative website are further categorised as a counter public, a public self-consciously positioned in opposition to an official, dominant public (Warner, 2002).

What Warner adds to the erstwhile theories of media effects is the process of the creation of publics by media content (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.70). Cowling and Hamilton (2012) broaden the Warnerian view, intimating that the publics are formed not only in relation to circulating texts (à la Warner) but also in relation to the repeated media production of texts through, for example, talk shows, opinion pages and Internet sites of analysis and discussion. Moreover, they argue that such publics are mobilizable in connection with political events or are socialised into particular ways of conducting public discussion (Cowling and Hamilton, 2012, p.96).

Public opinion formation via the media and the phenomenon of fake news

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) believed that public opinion was a good check on the authority of rulers. Bentham demanded that all official acts be publicized so that an enlightened public opinion could pass judgment on them, as would a tribunal. For Bentham, public opinion is the only check on “the pernicious exercise of the power of government” (Bentham, 1983). Recent modern scholarship on

public opinion has endorsed Bentham's elevation of public opinion in the 19th century to the rank of democratic rule's tribunal, thereby rendering as rational the citizen-cum-voter who participates in public opinion formation on issues of public interest (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Popkin, 1991). Fraser (1990) defines public opinion as "critical commentary on authorised decision-making that transpires elsewhere" (Fraser, 1990, p.75).

Democratic politics incentivise citizens to collectively form an opinion –i.e. public opinion - on several national (i.e. public) interest issues. Citizens-cum-voters are called upon to vote for candidates in national elections and referenda. Sometimes, their views are sought on proposed national budgets, constitutional amendments, new tax regimes, and other legislative proposals. Sticky issues emanating from any one of the three arms of government (Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary) can quickly become issues for public opinion. The political attitudes of these discursive publics that form public opinion are often stimulated or reinforced by separate agencies, for example, a politically-oriented newspaper, an electronic media outlet, an interest group, a government agency, or a public official. Media do facilitate the formation of public opinion. Media enable public deliberation and continue producing (and constraining) forms of public engagement (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.65).

Traditionally, media, through journalistic practice, produce news (Schudson, 1978, 1997). Crucially, recent scholarship on the media's capacity to produce news has identified the disturbing phenomenon of fake news (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.65; Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019; Egelhofer *et al.*, 2020). Using the Internet and social media to vent out his anti-mainstream media sentiments, the immediate past president of the United States, Donald Trump, was reported to have dismissed mainstream news media such as CNN television broadcasts as 'fake news' (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.64). Internet websites break stories and promote views that mainstream news media are suspicious of. Today, in the 21st century, the massive global networks of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram—and hence the emergence of social media platforms--dominate the distribution of journalism to

the extent that mainstream media have arguably ceded control over the circulation of news (Cowling and Mwale, 2020, p.64). Thus, with the entry of social media in the media space of the public sphere of democracy, old school, that is, fact-based, objective, and truth-oriented, journalism can no longer be the maxim of news production by the media in this new era. The media's production of opinion and debate in the public sphere cannot be limited to mainstream or legacy media. Therefore, today the term media is broadly and loosely used to describe print and electronic media as well as social media. Mass media do not dominate the media space of the public sphere today.

The democratising potential of the emerging virtual sphere and the intensification of fake news¹

While the political potential of the Internet and social media, i.e. what Zizi Papacharissi (2002, 2009) calls the virtual sphere, is not yet well known at this early stage of scholarly investigation into media and its impact on society, there is a general scholarly consensus that the envisioned emerging virtual sphere provides more space for people to share personal views that can make their way onto the public agenda. One of the factors leading to online media's widening of the space for general critical commentary is that the Internet and social media transcend geographic boundaries, giving birth to an online or virtual transnational public sphere.

Barring commercialisation and limited access to ICT, the virtual sphere enables a plurality of voices to partake in public criticism and commentary. The Internet and social media provide more public spaces for self-expression and introspection at the level of an individual end-user. The individual player in the

1 Although fake news is as old as the printing press itself, the advent of the Internet and social media has intensified the production and dissemination of fake news globally especially in times of great uncertainty and crises. The online *Macmillan Thesaurus* defines fake news extensionally as lie, invention, falsehood, untruth, misinformation, fabrication, white lie, half-truth, a tissue of lies, or fairy tale. In the growing media communication literature, the phenomenon of fake news is rendered either as a genre of *disinformation*, or as a label used as a political tool to delegitimize and discredit mainstream news, or as a buzzword simply used to describe something as false or bad. The third sense can be seen as *misinformation*. (See, e.g., Egelhofer *et al.*, 2020; Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019).

virtual sphere of social media platforms is narcissistic, so she primarily serves her self-interest. Her self-expression is addressed mainly to herself, so she is anarchistic, individualistic, undecided, and in potential discord with any other individual or group on the societal issues she comments on.

The narcissistic character of an online public critical commentator can be exemplified in citizen journalism and blogging, in which the commentator initiates storytelling while enjoying a relative degree of anonymity, which affords her unimpeded free speech and privacy. This online anonymity promotes a more open and indubitably free exchange of ideas by overcoming identity boundaries usually associated with participants in the rational-critical debate of the Habermasian public sphere. Moreover, from the vantage point of a private sphere, a citizen journalist or blogger can contribute significantly to the public agenda, thereby influencing public opinion on issues of public interest.

Thus, an individual who was otherwise unheard, unseen, and suppressed can now find a rare virtual space for expressing their grievances and discontent with the status quo. In this sense, online communication, such as citizen journalism and blogging, creates a space for subversion (e.g. sedition and voice of dissent) and an enclave for oppositional voices from a private sphere, thereby obfuscating the traditional public/private dichotomy. Public critical commentary, from a private sphere of social media platforms, directed at state authorities and other societal leaders engenders what Papacharissi (2010) christens as ‘monitorial citizenship’. Monitorial citizenship can be seen as complete and direct active participation, which is authentic participatory democracy. Additionally, social networking sites give politicians direct access to the electorate. Politicians with online media savvy can accrue tangible benefits during elections by positively influencing the electorate to vote in their favour.

Media Misinformation and Disinformation on the Covid-19 Pandemic

This section argues that while the media is essential in disseminating accurate and valuable information concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, it has sometimes

misinformed and disinformed the public for various reasons, increasing suspicions and making appropriate decision-making on the part of the public difficult. The Covid-19 pandemic is one public health issue that has recently shaken the world, attracting the media in an unprecedented way. The media and information communications technologies have significantly disseminated scientific and non-scientific information in response to the pandemic to keep people informed, safe, and connected (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021, p.1200). The media made known the symptoms of the coronavirus. They provided information on predicted outbreaks in good time. They notified people about the importance of implementing public health measures like wearing masks in public places, social distancing and observance of self-isolation and quarantine regulations for those infected.

Social distancing policies and lockdowns increased the use of social media for people to remain connected but contactless. Social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, YouTube, Reddit and WhatsApp) provided a contactless and hence alternative form of human connection and communication when it was not possible for people to physically meet (Leung *et al.*, 2022, p.1). Mainstream or legacy media like newspapers, television and radio stations provided a platform for general communication from healthcare officials and civil authorities while the rest of the masses remained connected mainly through social media platforms. Looking at the manner, including the rapidity, in which the coronavirus spread and the massive deaths that it caused, there was great anxiety and tension among people, and there was a need for many people to get accurate information to prevent the continued spread of the coronavirus and to treat those who were infected effectively.

People's lives suffer disruption when a crisis, emergency, or disaster occurs. In uncertain moments like these, people need accurate information as they struggle to understand what is happening, and the media play an important role in crisis communication in society (Elbarazi *et al.*, 2022, p.290). As healthcare officials were trying to inform everybody about the coronavirus, there were responses from those who trusted the healthcare officials and those who did not. Those who did

not trust the healthcare officials expressed negativity towards what they considered false or inaccurate information. The result was that there were a lot of conflicting views.

The democratic nature of social media makes such a situation inevitable as people tend to share views as they wish without much reflection and control. Social media allows everyone to express their views in line with the democratic freedoms of opinion and expression. The result was a lot of conflicting information, misinformation and disinformation compounded with many conspiracy theories in circulation online. The contradictory views created much uncertainty leading to excessive global circulation and the rapid spread of messages, information, misinformation, and disinformation about the pandemic concerning its causes, symptoms and signs, complications and (side) effects (Elbarazi *et al.*, 2022, p.290). The ambiguity produced as a result of conflicting information led to anxiety, which forced people to search for further information wherever they could get it, not primarily from mainstream media outlets, but most especially from friends over social media platforms (Elbarazi *et al.*, 2022, pp.288-291).

Social media users also used these ‘virtual sphere’ platforms to express their opinions and sentiments about the pandemic. However, the result was that there was too much information available to people, some accurate and most inaccurate, as the information was generated by ‘pseudo experts’ who were scientifically unknowledgeable and uninformed. Indeed, there was an avalanche of false information, misinformation and disinformation in circulation online, and hence (the epistemically overwhelmed) people could not distinguish between fake and truthful news. This led to information overload, an overabundance of information that people could not process and utilise effectively to make sound health decisions.

On 15 February 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director General of WHO, expressed concern over the overabundance and omnipresence of conflicting and inaccurate information about the Covid-19 pandemic. He felt that this information overload posed a significant challenge to people in adhering to appropriate public health policies meant to help in the fight against the pandemic.

The Director General of WHO declared that the world was facing an infodemic (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021), which is an overabundance of accurate and inaccurate information that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy (fact-based and truth-oriented) information sources and reliable guidance when they need it (Elbarazi *et al.*, 2022, p.290; Saribas and Çetinkaya, 2021, pp.235-236). Infodemic is overabundant information “disseminated during an epidemic, and that spreads among humans in an epidemic-like manner through digital and physical information systems” (Suarez-Clemente *et al.*, 2022, p.5324). Misinformation and disinformation led to mistrust of otherwise reliable sources of information. As a result, many people developed distorted perceptions of the coronavirus leading to failure to adopt preventative health behaviours. For example, negative perceptions led to vaccine hesitancy. Vaccine hesitancy was mainly due to people’s underestimation of the risks posed by the coronavirus.

The false information was about the origin and cause of Covid-19, its transmission, its long-term effects, and its influence on different groups such as older people and children, treatments and cures, as well as prevention measures and available vaccines including the impact and efficacies of various interventions by healthcare officials and other players (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021, p.1200; Elbarazi *et al.*, 2022, p.290). Fake news resembles legitimate mainstream news content but is fabricated news (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2022, p.1201) which is often inaccurate but masquerading as verifiable truth. It is manufactured for various reasons, including the promotion of sales, the desire to gain popularity, sheer propaganda for the rise of an ideology or the influence of political attitudes and public opinion. A typical example of fake news was the emergence of the H1N1 Influenza in 1918. The Spanish Flu spread had disastrous economic and psychosocial consequences due to stigmatization (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021, p.1201). Misinformation is fake news (fabricated information) spread unintentionally or unconsciously. Disinformation occurs when an individual or institution intentionally or consciously creates and shares untruthful or inaccurate information (Suarez-Clemente *et al.*, 2022, p.5324). “Disinformation is often amalgamated with semi-authentic news to enhance its aura of authenticity” (Das and Ahmed, 2021, p.147).

With regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, the misinformation and disinformation were compounded by some of the following conspiracy theories:

The Wuhan Institute of Virology bioengineered the virus

The Chinese city of Wuhan is home to a virology institute where much research on bat coronaviruses has been going on for a long time. Wuhan City was the first to record the new SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus, which causes Covid-19 and consequently became the epidemic's epicentre. The news of the outbreak of Covid-19 spread fast all over the world. The coincidence that the city where research on bat coronaviruses has been carried out for a long time was also the city where the virus was reported for the first time made many people presume and hastily conclude that the coronavirus must have been manufactured in one of the virology labs (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021, p.1203) but accidentally escaped and infected humans. The coronavirus was later sarcastically portrayed publicly as the "Wuhan Virus," or, in the case of former United States President Donald Trump, the "Chinese Virus," which has racist overtones. However, the scientific evidence indicates that the genetic sequencing of the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus does not match any viruses studied at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (Lynas, 2020). So far, scientific information indicates that the virus originated from an animal source (Suarez-Clemente *et al.*, 2022, p.5327). The rapid spread of this conspiracy theory globally led to ridicule, discrimination, and sometimes xenophobic violence against the Chinese and their government in various parts of the world.

The virus as a biological weapon

This particular version was that the virus did not just escape from a lab, but it was intentionally created as a bio-warfare weapon (Ullah *et al.*, 2021; Saribas and Cetinkaya, 2021, p.242) by the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which linked to China's bio-weapons programme (Berezow, 2020, p.1). US Senator Tom Cotton held this view, ignoring scientific evidence that the coronavirus has natural origins in bats (Lynas, 2020).

The US Military imported the virus into China

The Chinese coined this conspiracy theory to respond to the US anti-China conspiracy theories. At the height of the bitter exchange of words over the origins of the coronavirus between the Chinese and their accusers, Zhao Lijian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, alleged that the US military might have brought the deadly coronavirus to Wuhan (Berezow, 2020, p.2) during the Military World Games (Lynas, 2020). Others said the virus was “a means of creating a biological war against China to suppress its economic growth...” (Suarez-Clemente, 2022, p.5329).

5G networks weaken immunity and enhance the spread of Covid-19

This conspiracy theory holds that the coronavirus that causes Covid-19 spreads fast through the electromagnetic spectrum of the G5 network, weakening human immunity (Ullah *et al.*, 2021, p.95). However, it is scientifically known that it is biologically impossible for the coronavirus to travel through such a spectrum, for the latter are waves or photons, while viruses are biological particles made up of proteins and nucleic acids. The conspiracy theory spread fast because the rapid planting of 5G networks occurred the same time the coronavirus hit the world. This conspiracy theory led to the destruction of telecommunication masts, the setting on fire of cell phone towers, and the abuse of telecommunications personnel in countries like the US and the UK (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021).

Bill Gates and his digital microchips

In 2015 American billionaire and philanthropist Bill Gates commenting on Ebola, warned of the possibility of another pandemic. As a result, many conspiracy theorists picked on Gates as somebody who knew that the Covid-19 pandemic was coming, and they concluded that he must have purposely developed it (Lynas, 2020) as he is strongly rumoured to be a significant financier of most multinational pharmaceuticals from the West. Alongside this conspiracy theory was the thinking that Bill Gates wanted the whole world to be vaccinated to implant

digital microchips for tracking and controlling people worldwide (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021, p.1203; Ullah *et al.*, 2021, p.95).

Pharmaceutical Companies and Plot Covid-19

Pharmaceutical Companies are alleged to have concocted and plotted Covid-19. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, many multinational pharmaceuticals from the West heavily invested in research to develop a drug that would treat Covid-19. Companies like Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Novartis, and AstraZeneca spent millions of dollars investing in research for therapeutics for Covid-19. The media houses were awash with hopes for a new cure or vaccine. For example, through Sean Hannity, Fox News encouraged viewers to try even unproven ‘treatments’ like hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine (Pleat, 2020). Even globally-influential political leaders like Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Messias Bolsonaro promoted hydroxychloroquine as an efficacious treatment for the coronavirus, the palpable lack of scientific evidence on the efficacy of the said drug notwithstanding (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021, p.1203).

One would not doubt the conflict of interest as all these major multinational pharmaceuticals paid millions of dollars in advertising to Fox News and other media houses of global reach. Moreover, some of these global pharmaceutical companies are the manufacturers of drugs being fiercely advertised as possible cures for Covid-19, for example, Novartis’ hydroxychloroquine. As a result, a conspiracy theory emerged about these big pharmaceutical companies. The purveyors of this conspiracy theory believed that Covid-19 and all the publicity around it were tricked by these global pharmaceutical companies in a drive to make everybody feel sick so that to easily and quickly sell their drugs and make quick and easy money (Ullah *et al.*, 2021, p.95).

Some Africans were lured into believing this conspiracy theory because of their negative perceptions. For example, western scientists and the WHO were baffled by the claim made by Madagascar president Andry Nirina Rajoelina on 20th April 2020 that Madagascar had discovered a herbal cure for Covid-19

(Sikwa, 12 May 2020). As a result, several African nations, including Senegal, lined up to purchase stocks of the herbal cure for Covid-19 from Madagascar. But, instantly, harsh criticisms poured in from the WHO (BBC, 22 April 2020) and other renowned medical institutions over the Malagasy concoction, comprised of indigenous plants and traditional herbs. Nevertheless, Madagascar vehemently defended their herbal cure, telling the world that those who administered it did not suffer severe illness and that many recovered from Covid-19.

Many felt the WHO-led harsh criticisms against Malagasy president Andry Rajoelina were based on jealousy because whoever would be first to discover the cure for Covid-19 would make much money. None of the world bodies was prepared to discover the truth about the Malagasy herbal cure for the coronavirus. It was seen as a severe threat to the West's capitalistic world domination as exercised through their multinational pharmaceuticals. It appeared that the West was not prepared to lose its monopolistic control of medical research on drugs globally after having already pumped millions of dollars in research into the cure for the deadly coronavirus.

Non-existence of Covid-19

Some people do not believe in the existence of Covid-19. Some find it hard to accept that a flu-like illness could be life-threatening. The virus is intangible and not very concrete, and for some individuals, it is tough to accept that a "flu-like illness" could be life-threatening (Ullah *et al.*, 2021, p.95). Others believe that Covid-19 is an income-generating activity for healthcare personnel. Healthcare personnel are now notorious for diagnosing every kind of fever as Covid-19 to claim allowances. In addition, some countries inflate statistics of their Covid-19 patients to solicit funding through medical aid and grants.

Covid-19 Vaccines

As of 12 January 2022, nine vaccines were validated for use, according to the WHO. However, there have been conspiracy theories about Covid-19 vaccines. One such conspiracy theory stipulates that vaccines do not work and are very

harmful and cause autism, autoimmune diseases and infertility in teenage girls (Ullah *et al.*, 2021, p.95). This particular conspiracy theory gained momentum when some vaccinated people died of Covid-19. So many felt strongly that getting vaccinated did not mean that one would not suffer and eventually die from Covid-19. With amplified media-orchestrated public debate on side-effects and efficacies of the various vaccines, the popular emphasis shifted from getting total protection to lessening the impact of the attack of the coronavirus on humans, and hence the vaccine hesitancy all over the world.

Promotion of fake cures

The media promoted fake cures for Covid-19, such as adding pepper to meals, drinking or injecting oneself with bleach or disinfectants, drinking highly concentrated alcohol, and gargling lemon and salt water. Unfortunately, these fake cures led to severe consequences such as deaths, blindness and increased hospitalizations (Anastasiades *et al.*, 2021, p.1203).

The section has discussed the availability of too much conflicting information on Covid-19 regarding its nature, prevention and cure and the taking of sides by the media to influence the public to take their side of the story (claiming monopoly over truth), which made many people very suspicious leading to confusion over any recommendations made by official health bodies.

The One-sided View of the Covid-19 Pandemic

This section argues that communication of the Covid-19 pandemic by the media has led to ‘pandemic epistemicide,’ which has resulted in ‘manufactured mass ignorance’ even though the media, in their different forms and configurations, can effectively be of use to communicate health information to the public during a pandemic such as Covid-19. Such a public health crisis almost always results in increased public usage and consumption of news media of all formats (Wakefield, 2010). The much sought-after information ranges from the cause, spread or prevalence, control, prevention, treatment, hospitalisations, deaths, and recovery rates. This information plays a crucial role in people’s perceptions,

eventually impacting their decisions, conduct, and behaviour during the pandemic. Unfortunately, due to the rapid pace at which information is demanded and consumed in a pandemic, the media tend to fall into the trap of providing information that does not meet the required standards, which results in the bulk of the information being inaccurate, biased, and not subjective.

However, accurate and timely information must be disseminated to the public. In the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, media have been a crucial communication tool for information generation, dissemination, and consumption. In this public communication practice, several emerging themes about the role that the media have played and are playing in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. These emerging themes include the one-sided view and the monological perspective that has been and continues to be mediated by mainstream or legacy media, leading, for example, to the silencing or dismissal of alternative interpretations or unorthodox views.

A closer look at the media suggests that there has been a one-sided view on the pandemic that mainstream media have vigorously mediated. Mainstream media appears to have sided with a particular perspective of the pandemic and neglected other views and interpretations based on various ulterior motives. For instance, what we now know as Covid-19 was discovered in a laboratory in Wuhan Province of China in December 2019 and from there, the news about the coronavirus spread like bushfire to several countries worldwide. The media has reported a lot about Covid-19's original cause and how or why it became rampant in some countries rather than others. However, all that is officially known (taken as accurate) about Covid-19 has been limited and confined to what the World Health Organization (WHO) has chosen to be made known to the public.

There has been such a one-sided view and hence a monological perspective because public discourse in the media is generally framed or "drawn up" by the media houses themselves. Goffman (1974), one of the proponents of the concept of framing by the media, defines frames as "schemata of interpretation" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Entman's (1993) definition of framing considers it as picking some

features of professed reality and giving them more salience in communication, thus promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the phenomena. In short, frames tend to enforce some aspects of truth and exclude certain others.

In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, with all the misinformation and disinformation, it can be argued that most of what the mainstream media has communicated to the public has been framed. This framing could be seen in issues surrounding the spread of the pandemic to the purported vaccines made available to prevent the continued spread of the coronavirus variants. For example, the proclaimed numbers in mainstream media on the rapidity of the coronavirus spread were highly suspect regarding their accuracy. By publicizing ever-increasing numbers regarding how the coronavirus was spreading, more people in many countries were subtly induced or coerced to get vaccinated, serious lingering doubts and concerns about the efficacies of the multiplicity of vaccines notwithstanding.

Media practitioners often frame the information they gather when reporting events or issues. Frames either inform or emphasize or do both to impact public opinion on a given subject in a certain way that we may call an angle of the story (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Framing explores how people construct their social worlds and generate meanings, relations, and identities through linguistic and paralinguistic means (Gordon, 2015). Gamson (1992) likens news reporting, an avenue wherein framing lies, with storytelling in that the storyteller can salute some aspects even though news stories are factual representations of events. This salience-giving is called framing. Framing makes certain “facets of a perceived reality more salient in a text, to promote a specific problem definition, moral evaluation, causal interpretation, and treatment recommendations” (Entman, 1993, p.52). Frames are the “organizing principles that are socially shared and work to structure the social world meaningfully” (Reese, 2001, p.11).

Thus, different frames cause the same issue to be interpreted differently (Gandy, 2001). Hence, framing analysis helps in understanding how media manufacture public opinion and thus a single perceptive to a complex reality by

giving salience to specific facts at the expense of others (Miller and Riechert, 2003). Media can manufacture public opinion and consent on an event or issue. The media's power to manufacture consent in the service of propaganda has been a subject of scholarly interest for several years, dating back to the late 1980s (See, e.g., Herman and Chomsky, 1988). We add that media can manufacture ignorance for the public –i.e. ‘manufactured mass ignorance’ by purveying, among other things, fake news, misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda by advancing a one-sided view in a monologue on an issue at stake in society.

The media play a significant role in providing real-time information on pandemic outbreaks. One function of the media is to promote transparent and vibrant public deliberation around public health issues at stake in society, including public debate on pandemic outbreaks, cause, transmission, impact and possible remedies. However, when news is fake, false, biased and misleading and hence framed propagandistically, pandemic media coverage, such as media coverage of Covid-19, can be far-reaching and devastating for individuals, communities and societies.

In the specific case of the Covid-19 pandemic, information can make the difference between life and death. According to Su et al. (2021), studies have shown that some media outlets often issue biased and misleading reports on Covid-19, facilitating the spread of misinformation on the coronavirus. For example, an analysis of a sample of 38 million news media reports from January 1 to May 25, 2020, globally (as analysed from different major media outlets) showed that a staggering 84% of misinformation distributed by mainstream or legacy media was neither challenged nor fact-checked before it reached the public, thereby effectively exposing a countless number of people to misinformation, such as “miracle cures” or the “Democratic Party hoax,” which had potentially unpredictable but devastating human, social and economic consequences.

Noteworthy also is the fact that public fear, anxiety, and panic generated by Covid-19-related misinformation and disinformation in the media could have a long-lasting impact on people's socio-psychological health, continuing to be felt

by the public way after the Covid-19 media communication cycles. Other concerns about misinformation at the peak of the pandemic in 2021 included uncertainties due to lockdown, shelter-in-place, self-isolation or quarantine, and social distancing policies. These public health measures generated stress and anxiety in people with mental health conditions and mentally-healthy individuals. In addition, since the peak of the pandemic in 2021, interpersonal interaction and communication have been rendered contactless (only online) as per the WHO guidelines, and social media use was associated with or led to depression, anxiety and distress (Leung *et al.*, 2021).

The hefty deleterious consequences of misinformation spread rapidly by social media during the pandemic have been noted with great concern (Barua *et al.*, 2020). Together, misinformation and fake news have reportedly represented essential factors leading to confusion and insecurity among the people during the pandemic (Tagliabue *et al.*, 2020). Alena Bermes argues, “The concern over fake news is aggravated by the fact that it spreads faster and wider than fact-based news and that corrective measures (for example, countering rumours by spreading accurate information) are typically ineffective” (Bermes, 2021).

The surge in misinformation –leading to ‘information overload’- during the pandemic has been noted with similarly great concern as having the potential to incite anti-mask, anti-vaccine and anti-5G protests globally. Alena Bermes (2021) uses ‘information overload’ interchangeably with ‘infodemic’ to imply “an overabundance of information, both true and false, that people are confronted with via social media.” For her, information overload negatively affects mental health and fosters negative behavioural responses to a public health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Bermes, 2021). In general, digital media and citizen journalism have escalated the infiltration of fake news to create a post-truth society (Das and Ahmed, 2021, p.146). The danger with misinformation is that it results in misinformed behaviours in people’s ill-informed responses to a pandemic. For example, in 2021 in Singapore, a study found that exposure to online misinformation prompted people’s engagement in self-reported misinformed behaviours such as

eating more garlic and regularly rinsing their noses with saltwater while discouraging evidence-based prevention behaviours such as social distancing (Kim and Tandor, 2022).

All this framing, and the resulting misinformation and disinformation, has led to the Covid-19 infodemic. Infodemics involve the deliberate spread of misinformation and disinformation via the media, particularly on social media platforms (Gisoni, 2022). Covid-19 infodemic online can potentially detract from healthcare experts' efforts, fuelling public fear, anxiety, and panic and leading to mistrust and uncertainty. In addition, the Covid-19 infodemic has grave personal and economic consequences (Su *et al.*, 2021). Infodemic involves an array of topics on which misinformation and disinformation are publicized online, for example, through Twitter and posts on Facebook, often driven by special interest groups and individualistic, narcissistic bloggers with ulterior motives and with vested commercial interests (Su *et al.*, 2021). Xu and Liu (2021) argue that the infodemic makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it, causes social panic about health, widens the gaps between races and regions, and even brings social chaos all over the world" (Xu and Liu, 2021). Other typical trends include conspiracy theories peddled online that have problematically dubbed Covid-19 as the "Chinese Virus" and the promotion of disinfectants purportedly trending as a "cure" for Covid-19. These infodemic varieties have led to a highly suspect and misleading narrative around the pandemic.

In sum, perhaps the most problematic media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic involves false and dishonest content. The media's instigation of "fake news" has led to the deterioration of public trust around communication on Covid-19. It is challenging to predict what might happen if people ignore Covid-19 information disseminated through mainstream media outlets, where healthcare experts and government officials share the latest developments related to the coronavirus. What is not difficult to imagine are the consequences of a public deliberately made "ignorant" by the media; the results could be and have been unimaginable and catastrophic.

Conclusion

We have observed that deliberative democracy occurs in the public sphere, where the informal discussion sometimes operates counter to official or state voices. In the past, the media set the agenda to exert planned influence on the masses. However, today with the Internet and social media, agenda-setting for public debate has been democratized as anybody, regardless of status, can join or initiate debate through various social media platforms. People feel free to express their views in a way they have never done before. We have discussed how the current media affects the dissemination of information regarding the coronavirus pandemic, with conflicting voices battling it in public concerning the vaccines' origin, causes, cure, prevention and effects. Some have taken advantage of the media to advance falsehood, and those genuinely look for the truth as they remain suspicious of those claiming to have it. As a result, there have been various conspiracy theories which have been discussed regarding the coronavirus pandemic. Misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news can have a very devastating impact on the lives of people. However, a healthy public debate regarding the coronavirus is needed so that the information provided is accurate for the good of humanity.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

We declare that we do not have any conflict of interest.

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