



Research Article:

Access to Information on Covid-19 for Persons with Visual Impairment in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In December 2019, a novel virus SARS-2 (COVID-19) was discovered in the city of Wuhan, in China. The news of the discovery of the virus in Wuhan City spread rapidly across the world. By January 2020, the whole world was aware of the deadly COVID-19 virus and how it threatened humanity. However, the spread of such important information was high among the sighted. Those with visual impairment were not in the mainstream of information dissemination about the pandemic. This research sought to investigate how the information on COVID-19 was disseminated, if persons with visual impairment would access such information and strategies that could be adopted to reach persons with visual impairment on COVID-19 information.

Keywords: *access, information, COVID-19, visual, impairment*

Introduction

In this twenty first century, technology has been in use like never before in the history of mankind. Technological companies who have performed financially well this century are in the telecommunication sector. Human effort was concentrated on how to disseminate information to the most remote human being on Earth. When the Covid-19 pandemic ensued, technology was at play to make sure that information was disseminated to every human being on Earth. All the modern modes of communication, like use of cell-phones, televisions, radios, the internet and print media, were used to expose the deadliness of the SARS-2 virus. However, in that effort, some of the persons with visual impairment were apparently left out (Centre for Diseases Control (CDC), 2021), yet they are some of the most vulnerable as far as contracting the virus is concerned (UNCAC, 2021). This study sought to interrogate information dissemination on the Covid-19 pandemic, the marginalisation of persons with visual impairment and how this anomaly could be addressed. Therefore, the overall objectives of this research paper are thus, to analyse the Covid-19 information dissemination methods,

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assess if persons with visual impairment could access Covid-19 information and explore strategies that could be adopted in order for information on Covid-19 to reach persons with visual impairment.

Background

In developed countries like in the United States of America, access to information enables citizens to effectively monitor, hold the responsible government accountable and to have an informed dialogue about decisions that affect citizens' lives. Access to information empowers all citizens including the vulnerable and marginalised people, persons with visual impairment included, as they seek to claim their broader rights and entitlements (Chakuchichi, 2013). In Europe on the other hand, the potential contribution to good governance of access to information lies in both the willingness of the government to be transparent and to consider the marginalised as well as the ability of the citizens to demand and use information. This is, however, a challenge for developing countries like those in Africa.

In the African setting, access to information or freedom of information has a different meaning compared to developed countries, whether it is during a pandemic or during a period political turmoil. Governance transparency is a major issue of crisis in Africa, which highly contributes to the deformed meaning of access to information (Lee and Mun, 2020). This is worse especially for the poor and marginalised groups like persons with visual impairment whereof, they face their reality through interpretation given by their aids. If their aids do not share information, it means they are excluded. This is particularly worrisome especially when it comes to important information like that on Covid-19, which if not well interpreted using WHO guidelines and regulations, the visually impaired are left exposed to the viral infection (UNACA, 2021).

According to Lee and Mun (2020), public access to information on SARS-CoV-2 has always been marked by uncertainty mainly because these were scientific discoveries. However, as of August 2020, Covid-19 had infected more than 18.6 million people and claimed more than 700 000 lives worldwide with no cure or vaccine having been discovered. This pandemic has claimed the largest number of lives in developed countries where advanced medical technology and resources are abound, more than any other disease in recent human history. Access to information on Covid-19 when it first emerged was scanty, with the origins of the disease being attributed to controversial pathological origins. For the sighted especially those in developed countries, access to such information made a tremendous impact (Lee and Mun, 2020). The consequences to medical, economic and social aspects of lives raised the need for public access to relevant information such as information on the status of the pandemic, measures being taken by relevant governments to control the spread of the virus such as lockdowns, quarantine requirements, travel bans and curfews (Centre for Diseases Control (CDC), 2021).

Such information is relevant to all citizens, whether sighted or those with visual impairment. However, it is sad to note that information dissemination methods and techniques applied on dissemination was mostly meant for the sighted, with the needs of



those with visual impairment not being considered. This is the critical aspect of this study as it sought to understand the dynamics of access to information on Covid-19 for persons with visual impairment.

According to UNESCO (2021), access to information during Covid-19 pandemic was considered highly important in most countries. In some countries, developed and developing, access to information on Covid-19 has been conscripted into law. This is exemplified by Cambodia, which finalised an Access to Information on COVID-19 Law. This was made possible by the help of UNESCO and the Embassy of Sweden who worked with the Ministry of Information in Cambodia to enact the law. UNESCO has engaged in these kinds of projects in many countries where they ensure that access to information for everyone, who include the sighted and the visually impaired (see UNESCO 2021).

In Zimbabwe, an official Covid-19 Information Hub was created for free use through the Short Message Service (SMS) for Econet (a mobile network provider) users. Just by sending a free SMS to the information hub from any mobile phone, a person could access free information on Covid-19. It is, however, very sad to note that vulnerable groups like persons with visual impairment were not directly considered on such platforms. Most of the information dissemination methods on Covid-19 have a pattern in that their design and delivery is meant for the sighted.

Theoretical underpinnings

This paper was hinged on the access to information theory by Daruwala and Nayak (2017). Access to information is an aspect of life that is very crucial to the existence of human beings worldwide. According to Daruwala and Nayak (2017), access to information or freedom of information is the empowerment of the citizenry to be accountable for their form of action that is based on informed decision-making. According to the United Nations (2020), access to information is highly critical for enabling citizens of a nation to exercise their voice and to shape their behaviour based on provided information. According to the UNCAC Coalition (2021), the right to access information is an essential part of a democratic society and is recognised as a fundamental right by leading human rights organisations. The right of access to information empowers citizens to obtain information held by public bodies that includes the obligation by government to publish information proactively especially if it is for the benefit of the citizens (UNCAC, 2021).

Research methodology

Due to the axiological nature of the research, the researchers used qualitative research methods. Thus, the interpretivist research philosophy that relies on inductive research approach was adopted. The adoption of these qualitative methodologies meant that the study produced descriptive data (see Brynard and Hanekon, 2017:29). In the study, the researchers adopted interactive interviewing where people are asked to verbally describe their experiences of a phenomenon. This was done through face-to-face interview sessions with individual interviewees as well as focus group discussions. The qualitative data that was



provided depth and detail through direct quotations and careful description of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviours.

The researchers used direct quotations that are a basic source of raw data in qualitative research in that they reveal the participants' levels of emotion, the way in which they have organised the world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences and their basic perceptions. Other authors explored these views (Paton, 2017:14). The task was therefore to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accuracy and thoroughness as well as their point of view about the events.

Research design and data collection

Research design holds the research together (Miles and Huberman, 2014:40). The research design was used to structure the research, to show how all of the major parts of the research project (samples or groups, measure treatments or programmes, and methods of assignments) work together to try to address the central research objectives. A theory-grounded research design was adopted. It is feasible, flexible and efficient (Hammersley, 2013:6). In literature, the research design reflects the theories which are being investigated, can be implemented, have some flexibility built in them, and it strikes a balance between redundancy and tendency to over design. It shows a sequence of events that connects the procedures for collecting the empirical data to the initial research questions, the subsequent data collection analysis and conclusions on the other (Creswell, 2014:21). This design relates to the practical aspects of how the study is conducted in order to answer the research objectives to be addressed. For the purposes of this study, a predominantly qualitative research design was primarily used because it was able to facilitate the exploration, comprehension and assessment of the context within which the activities of civil society, Government and some schools in Masvingo, Zimbabwe can be assessed to ascertain if persons with visual impairment were accessing information on Covid-19.

This study used a case study with the researchers focusing on a single case because of its unique and exceptional qualities that can promote understanding or inform practice to similar situations (Adler and Adler, 2013:27). For the study, the researchers selected to use the case study of Masvingo as a sole point of data collection. The study targeted the Ministry of Information and Publicity in Masvingo, one of the civic organisation responsible for Covid-19 information publishing in Masvingo as well as visually impaired persons.

The researchers used purposive sampling technique to select twelve (12) persons with visual impairment - six (6) from Masvingo urban community and six (6) from remote areas like the district communities in Masvingo; two (2) key informants from the Ministry; two (2) key informants from civic organisation in Masvingo. The study used two types of data collection methods - focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews. These instruments are devised for the purposes of clarity and logic. Due diligence was ensured during the Covid-19 pandemic and all regulations were observed in the undertaking of interviews and other face-to-face interactions. The interviews used for the study were qualitative in-depth interviews with knowledgeable people on Covid-19 information dissemination. Other scholars focused on the



importance of information dissemination (Carter and Beaulieu, 2018). The purpose of key informant interviews was to collect information from a wide range of people including organisational leaders, professionals, and community members with first-hand knowledge about the situation of persons with visual impairments and their access to information. These respondents, with their particular knowledge and understanding, were considered essential in providing insight on information access by the visually impaired, recognising challenges (if any) and providing recommendations.

In research, face-to-face interviews are the most frequently used types of interviews. In this study, this was no exception. This format was used but it was more time intensive because it required additional scheduling and logistical planning. The advantages to this technique were that it provided a free exchange of ideas and lends itself to asking complex questions and getting detailed responses (Carter and Beaulieu, 2018). After each interview, the interviewer took some time to make additional notes and organise initial findings or impressions. Time was allocated for this after each interview. The face-to-face interviews typically lasted 20-30 minutes. Once engaged, informants were willing to speak longer.

In addition, the study utilised focus group discussions (FGDs). The FGD is one of the most versatile research methods used in qualitative research. The researchers selected this instrument for its convenience. A FDG is an excellent way of collecting qualitative data provided it is well arranged. In this study, participants were purposively selected from Masvingo urban. The group comprised six (6) visually impaired participants.

Research findings

The researchers used thematic analysis that is a common form of data analysis in qualitative research. According to Kumar (1996), a thematic approach is a distinctive and recurrent feature of the accounts of the participants that are characterised by experiences or perceptions the researchers view to be relevant to the study. The thematic approach captured important data in relation to the research objective. This approach ensured the researchers gained a more detailed account of one particular theme or group of themes. A theme captures something important about data in relation to the research questions and presents some level of patterned responses within the data set. The researchers also used content analysis. The thematic content analysis took the form of interview transcripts and responses from FDG.

Objective 1: The information dissemination methods used on Covid-19

Responding to this research item, the majority of the participants pointed out a variety of forms of information dissemination methods that were used to disseminate information like the internet, televisions, print media, radios and cellular phones on the Covid-19 outbreak, transmission and containment. On a daily basis, information on Covid-19 was disseminated mostly in the English language. On Covid-19 outbreak, participants stated that information was disseminated mostly through medical institutions, journals and websites. One of the key informants said:



The use of internet was high during the early days of the viral outbreak.

Participants also stated that those without internet access during the early days of the Covid-19 outbreak in December 2019 were in 'complete darkness' on what was taking place. One of the persons with visual impairment from remote communities like Bikita, Gutu, Chivi, Zaka and Mwenezi, stated that:

During the early days of the outbreak of the Corona Virus, we were in complete darkness of what was going on. We had no idea until recently when we heard of a disease that was causing massive deaths worldwide.

One of the participants from a civic society organisation said that:

Information on Covid-19 was highly privy during the early days of the viral outbreak. Only those in the medical field and especially at medical institutions had access to the information due to their exposure to research and internet access.

The participants also stressed that with time, medical information became more available to the public, and it was simplified without medical jargon, making it accessible. This was made easier through use of other non-medical information dissemination methods through media like the television and the social media. A key informant from the Ministry of Information and Publicity emphasised that:

Information on Covid-19 became available on other public media like televisions and social media in early 2020 when China was battling with the pandemic in Wuhan city.

Most of the research participants indicated that there was extensive use television networks especially those with global audiences like the BBC News, CNN News, France 24 News as well as the local television and radio stations. The participants also mentioned vivid graphical images of the effects of the pandemic in Wuhan City. One of the FGD participants indicated that:

The graphical images from the Cable News Networks were basically meant for the sighted because we never had anyone interpreting to us what it was all about and what was going on.

A research participant from the Masvingo Civic Society Organisation suggested that:

Early 2020, there was much public use of social media sending panic messages on the effects of Covid-19, especially for those who used WeChat, Facebook, and WhatsApp.



The majority of the participants pointed out that use of cellular phones was extensive in the dissemination of information on Covid-19. This was both through social media platforms as well SMS. A key informant from the Ministry of Information and Publicity highlighted that:

The WHO website became one focal point of reliable information that would control most scaring social media messages on Covid-19.

A respondent with visual impairment from the Masvingo community however pointed out that despite the increase in information dissemination, challenges persisted:

It is very hard getting interpretations from the sighted or relying regularly on hearsay from the sighted about what is going on in the world you are also living in. Sometimes what you get from one source differs extensively from the next source of information. Without information specifically meant for you, it is highly possible to assume the impossible.

Thus, the majority of the participants mentioned use of medical journal, websites of medical institutions, the WHO website, televisions, cellular phones, radios and social media platforms like WeChat, Facebook and WhatsApp, as the most common methods used to disseminate information on the Covid-19 pandemic. Of interest was that although social media platforms were a source of information, they also had a challenge as a source of misinformation and were sometimes used to disseminate incorrect information. For the study, however, it was clear from the interviews that not all these forms of information dissemination put persons with visual impairment directly into perspective.

Objective 2: Access to information of persons with visual impairment

Responding to this research item, most of the participants opined that access to information is the process of regulation by the authoritative government in making instruments that would allow the public to be empowered through access to information available on a phenomenon. The majority of the participants emphasised that whilst dissemination of information on Covid-19 was not clear to the Zimbabwean public, the position of a person with visual impairment would be worse off in such a situation. Thus, from the participants' point of view, the situation of persons with visual impairment was not prioritised or even considered when the news of the Covid-19 pandemic officially reached Zimbabwe. Thus, the participants strongly stressed that, already, before the Covid-19 pandemic, access to information for persons with visual impairment in general was not prioritised. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic only made the situation of persons with visual impairment worse.

The challenges faced by persons with visual impairment was put into perspective by participants who pointed out that the lack of legal instruments and policies compelling the government to prioritise this group was contributing to the challenges being faced. An informant from the Ministry of Information and Publicity stated that:



There has not been any specific legislation passed regarding access to information for persons with visual impairment.

One of participants with visual impairment impressed that:

The absence of policy or any legislation pertaining to access to information for persons with visual impairment, significantly point to the fact that there is no consideration of how that information can reach persons with visual impairment.

The majority of the participants highlighted that the absence of instruments on dissemination of information for visually impaired persons only means that this group is marginalised yet, they are among the most vulnerable groups, especially in pandemic situations. Persons with visual impairment were said to be challenges in deciphering presence of infectious mechanisms/agents of the Covid-19 virus or even to observe the regulations put in place, like social distancing and sanitisation points. That would make them more vulnerable to the virus. One of the participants from the focus group discussion expressed that:

The only way we can access information is through relay by the sighted even if the information is for life or death, the sighted has to relay to us their version of what was happening.

This assertion was reinforced by another participant who has a visual impairment who said:

It is not difficult to comprehend that those with visual impairment have to get information from their aids or those around them or family members.

Thus, the majority of the participants were of the opinion that persons with visual impairment need to have their own way of accessing information rather than relying on a third person who may not be available or may misinterpret the message. Participants from the Ministry of Information and Publicity pointed out that persons with visual impairment are not given any priority as to how they would access available important information. This was partly attributable to the fact that:

The general assumption is that everybody will access the information especially when it is sent through public media that reaches the general mass of the population.

Thus, there is no consideration of the reality that in society there are persons living with disabilities who may not be able to visualise information being disseminated on visual devices. Comparatively, it can also be noted that there are other persons with disabilities for example, those with hearing impairment who have also been marginalised and some have failed to access to information on Covid-19. UNCAC (2021) suggests that although visual and audio media were prevalent in disseminating Covid-19 information, persons with hearing impairment were marginalised in the context that most televised reports and advertisements on Covid-19 do not have interpretations for those with hearing impairment. Some of the



international news networks also do not have interpreters for those with hearing impairment including local television except during prime news time.

Objective 3: Strategies that can be adopted in order for information on Covid-19 to reach persons with visual impairment

Most of the participants were of the opinion that in order for persons with visual impairment to easily access information during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is need to develop methods and instruments that aid them to access information. They also mentioned some of the methods and instruments that could be used to improve access to information for persons with visual impairment. One of the learners in the FGD mentioned that:

The most possible way to strategise in assisting persons with visual impairment to access Covid-19 information is through use of assistive technologies.

Most of the participants who stressed use of assistive technologies mentioned the application of or development of hardware and software that could be used on cellular phones and on general mass media like television to interpret general visual news for the sighted to suit persons with visual impairment. One of the participants with visual impairment stressed that, it is possible to develop assistive technologies that could be used like the ZOOM software for the visually impaired persons that could do interpretations of visual activities during ZOOM meetings or interpretations of visual activities during news or when headlines were being announced. Participants also highlighted use of Google platforms for those with visual impairment as well as development of assistive keyboards and keypads on cellular phones. They applauded the development of software like JAWS and Nonvisual Desktop Access (NVDA). However, availability in the Zimbabwean context is still a challenge especially applications and services like Aira, Seeing AI for iOS. Even when these may be available, access to such gadgets is a challenge for most persons with visual impairment because most cannot afford.

The majority of the participants stressed that while some assistive technological tools and gadgets are available, they are out of reach for the poor and persons in remote areas with visual impairment. They were of the opinion that the Ministry of Information and Publicity should make technology more accessible to persons with visual impairment. A participant from the Masvingo Civic Society Organisation pointed out that:

Strategically, persons with visual impairment should have compensatory skills which emphasise use of literacy skills. They should also stress on independent living skills that should help them access information on Covid-19 instead of waiting for the government.

The research participants highlighted several strategies that persons with visual impairment could adopt during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of persons with visual impairment stressed that:



Some of the WHO regulations on Covid-19 are not friendly to us. For example, wearing of a mask inhibits the use of some sensory activities that we mostly rely upon, and this has adverse effect on our independent living.

Recommendations

Researchers

Access to information for persons with visual impairment is still a grey area. As such, the researchers recommend that there is need for more academics to consider conducting more studies on access to information by persons with visual impairment. Since the area of access to information for persons with visual impairment is relatively new, there is need for robust development of theories and models in that area. Researchers also need to invest more in access to information by learners with visual impairment during emergency situations like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Practitioners

The researchers recommended that the government should take necessary steps in addressing the information dissemination gap to marginalised groups such as persons with visual impairments. The Government should bring assistive technology closer to persons with visual impairment. Awareness campaigns on Covid-19 should include persons with visual impairment. Demonstrations during these campaigns should be inclusive in nature and take cognisance of their diverse needs. Policy makers should formulate policies on access to information that suit persons with visual impairment. Implementing agencies, such as civic society organisations, including organisations for persons with disabilities should consider disseminating information to persons with visual impairment in formats which are accessible. Medical institutions also have a duty to ensure that information is disseminated to persons with visual impairment without any discrimination.

Conclusion

From the findings, the researchers conclude that the instruments and tools as well as methods used for information dissemination on Covid-19 are not developed in consultation with persons with visual impairment. The researchers also conclude that most of persons with visual impairment do not have access to information because they do not have adequate tools and methods for access to information on the pandemic. The researchers also note that most persons with visual impairment had to access information on Covid-19 through their aids and relay of information from the sighted. The researchers conclude that the Government of Zimbabwe has done little in creating the conditions and infrastructure for the visually impaired to access information and to accommodate them in the information dissemination matrices. In light of this, it is recommended that the relevant Ministry of Information and Publicity should invest more on information dissemination in order to allow the visually impaired to access information which will not only enhance their wellbeing but can also save their lives.



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