

News Saliience: Setting the agenda during a time of crisis in Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative inquiry examined the power of traditional media versus social media in the framing of opinions during a health crisis. The researchers analysed the original narratives published in two Jamaican newspapers and the online feedback regarding the death of 19 neonates. The newborns became infected with the *serratia* and *klebsiella* bacteria in the country's two major hospitals. The data included articles that met the criteria for the Google search terms, *serratia*, *klebsiella*, *dead babies* and *dead babies scandal*. The result was a divergence of views that resulted in three themes from the news stories: resource challenges, unethical practices and call to action and from the online feedback: Step up for the babies, basket to carry water and fyahpon di incompetents. This study has implications for the way opinions are framed as posited by the Agenda-Setting theorists in the context of expanding mediatisation.

Key words: agenda-setting, online feedback, news stories, Jamaican media

In keeping with its Agenda-Setting role, the Jamaican media revealed that in 2015, 19 newborns, primarily under seven months gestation, died of nosocomial infections in two major hospitals in the country. The news articles covered angles related to ethical practices, resource challenges, and call to action. The online news stories elicited strong responses from readers for immediate action. Eventually the Minister of Health was forced to resign.

1. Introduction

Agenda-Setting theorists argue that mass media have the capacity to transfer issues of salience to media consumers based on the gate-keepers' perceived newsworthiness of the issue of the day (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Nisbet, 2008). However, the media output generates public responses and reactions hinge on the characteristics of the individual journalist, media routine, organisational and extra-media imperatives, and cultural factors (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Early emphasis of the theory explored the link between traditional media and public agendas, which was not immediately available, so the public often missed pertinent information regarding decision-making. But decades later, the Internet has transformed the theory thereby decentralising the media landscape (McCombs, 2005; Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015; Rashi & McCombs, 2015; Rogstad, 2016; Yu & Aikat, 2006). Web communities can now choose to have very different conversations than those proffered by elite media. Still, the Agenda-Setting theory is able to withstand those changes and continues to shape online discourse (Bright 2016) to the extent that consumers remain active even as the communication process becomes fragmented and areas of relevance expanded to include issues such as health, the economy, sports and the environment (Gruszczynski & Wagner, 2017). Moreover, the Agenda-Setting theory has now extended beyond the presupposed homogenous audience (Meraz, 2009; Lim, 2006 & McCombs, 2005), which for news consumers has led to the emergence of audience gatekeeping where the readers, listeners or viewers choose the active environment (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2015; Rashi & McCombs, 2015; Rogstad, 2016; Yu & Aikat, 2006). No longer do the editors or gatekeepers of news organisations solely control the public discourse by telling readers what to think about, but this power is now shared with users of the Web and the presence of the news comments can work to decrease the credibility of the news organisations (Colin & Roberts, 2016; Gruszczynski and Wagner, 2017).

In an effort to inform tests of the model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), the current study examined the responses of online commentators to news narratives following a "trigger event" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996) and aimed to capture the reaction of Jamaicans to the death of 19 neonates over a four-month period. Manning (2001) argues that trigger events (thought-provoking occurrences) always set a domino effect in motion, which eventually leads to transfer of salience to audiences, which in turn clamour for additional coverage. When traditional news organisations that are highly esteemed continue to cover an event in a sustained way (Crichter, 2008) as the Jamaican media did in this case, other less regarded news entities follow and the noise in the online space escalates, sometimes overshadowing that in the traditional media domain. The ripple effect is that all media

sources in Jamaica responded and as Dearing and Rogers (1996) warned years ago, when the coverage wanes, the problem still persists and could easily recur (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). We conducted this study with a view to examining the relevance of the Agenda- Setting theory in modern Jamaica, that like other countries is a society that over the last 10 years has experienced exponential expansion in traditional media output and concomitant growth in access to online content.

2. Design/Methodology

This research utilised a systematic qualitative content analysis design to analyse responses from the public to the news report of the “dead babies scandal”. Since this data was from the public domain where pseudonyms were used instead of personal names to protect anonymity, no ethical permission was required from the Institutional Review Board; however, the researchers upheld ethically responsible conduct of research in handling the data. Also, the researchers bracketed their personal feelings on the subject to maintain objectivity, a recommendation from Lincoln and Lincoln & Guba (1985) so that the data could be converted into impartial review.

The search was conducted using the appropriate and relevant keywords to identify online responses that were published in the two national newspapers. We collected data that was posted within the peak period: October 20, 2015 to November 10, 2015 (when the discussions were active in the news cycle) a recommendation from Winter & Eyal, (1981) and Wanta & Hu (1984) and an approach we have used in our previous work (Barnes & Archibald, 2017). The final search yielded 317 responses. Each researcher independently read the data with the research question in mind and highlighted relevant statements making an initial set of codes. The researchers were immersed in the raw data as they reviewed each response to the original stories as presented by the journalists, highlighting recurrent themes and patterns that addressed the research questions. According to Kim, Sefeik and Bradway (2016), this strategy of immersion is beneficial to the investigator and the reader as it connects the researcher to the data in an unbiased way and allows readers who have knowledge of the subject to appreciate their own experiences. Then together the researchers further analysed the codes, and three themes emerged from the online feedback: a) step up for the babies, b) basket to carry water, c) fyahpon di incompetents.

3. Results

Partial and complete, direct and reported statements were used to describe the sentiments of the population. It was notable that whereas many of the responses were posted simultaneously, the same attitude of the Jamaican people was ever present, to the extent that such themes were further divided into subcategories so that we could provide a thicker and richer description of the perspectives of the participants. The themes and subthemes included a) step up for the babies including i) compromising care and ii) dereliction of duty; b) basket to carry water including i) resource shortage and c) fyahpon di incompetents.

3.1 Step up for the Babies

This theme suggests that society's most vulnerable group was without adequate advocacy. This harsh reality was demonstrated in areas of compromising care and dereliction of duty.

3.1.1 Compromising care

It was a shame to Jamaicans that the knowledge of current standard of care for newborns needed to be a grave national concern warranting action on the part of citizens, "We have to step up for the babies and demand full investigation...since those in charge and are aware of the suboptimal conditions are turning a blind eye." A number of outcries included: "There is no possible excuse for the callous and negligent behavior that caused the deaths of those 19 babies, premature or not." and another, "This is a serious matter. Newborn babies ... indeed prematurely born babies ... are suffering and dying due to this preventable situation..." Another added that the Minister of Health's history of poor performance, "demonstrates a callous and insensitive approach to life...." What aggravated the situation further for citizens was the declaration from the Minister of Health that the deceased premature newborns as result of the outbreak "were not babies in the real sense". That comment suggested that the Minister of Health is not on the cutting-edge of neonatology or his myopic vision for the health of Jamaica's vulnerable population needs correction. It appears that if the person in charge of health care is that cold-blooded about patients, then they as citizens needed to be the advocates for this at-risk group and families. Of greater concern is the clear question regarding where the minister stands on matters surrounding right to life and abortion, a conversation that is quite sensitive in Jamaica.

3.2. Dereliction of duty

This subheading addresses the public's contempt towards compensated officials. Online newspaper commentators were outraged at the incompetence of elected officials who failed their communities through irresponsibility and negligence in their oversight of the medical facilities. Many online writers who reacted to the news articles regarding the death of the newborns called for action on the part of the government with one writer declaring, "Height of incompetency, ineptitude, and dereliction of duty...in any decent country this minister [Minister of Health] would be history." Another commentator lambasted the health officials for keeping the deadly outbreak silent as if they expected this horrific outcome to go unnoticed:

With that many deaths and another infection on the go, the response should have been immediate and the CMO [Chief Medical Officer] or those she sent out to investigate should have followed up and reported the findings. It seems there was no urgency until the media got hold of it.

Other online commentators did not refrain from hurling insults at those who should take responsibility for the situation with one asking: "Why does this Harbinger of Death [health minister] still exist in his post [position]? What does it have to cost us before we see him gone?" Upgrading the health facilities in the country was another area of their job responsibility in which government officials failed the country. It seemed to irate citizens that

such public dignitaries were selfish, since they are fiscally fortified enough to meet their healthcare needs outside of Jamaica unlike the overwhelming majority of the population. Writers described those politicians as having "... one foot in and one foot out", meaning their heart is not in Jamaica as they "own houses in South Florida... so no real love ... for country..." Another writer concurred, "These people in charge of health care in Jamaica are the first ones to run to Miami when their family member is afflicted with any health issue; hence, the lives of the average Jamaican means nothing to them." Since the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the Chikungunya Virus and the Ministry of Health's reaction were still fresh in the minds of the population, the citizens found the Minister's flawed excuses of repeated ignorance repulsive; yet he was allowed to maintain his position despite his failed leadership, which is unacceptable to the tax payers and voting citizens.

Considering the irony of the situation, one commentator chided the government for promoting itself as a regime that cares for people, particularly for the individuals, families and communities that need the most support, while simultaneously lacking accountability in this deadly situation without regard for people's emotional pain: "The lack of acceptance, accountability and humility is a very ugly look for a government that prides itself on 'people power'," said one commentator.

Jamaicans were annoyed that executive officials were not vigilant about securing qualified people to fill administrative roles in the health sector; rather, they were making decisions based on political affiliation. Online writers indicated that premature neonates were left at the mercy of ill-equipped health facilities; and rather than advocating for support to improve the neonatal intensive care facilities, the management concealed the inefficiency of the services. As a result, many newborns' chances of optimal outcome were diminished. Still, other writers bemoaned the fact that rather than making progress on the transparency index, the government was regressing and still made decisions based on political expediency:

"These political appointees who only care about keeping their snout in the trough don't care a kick about what happens to us. All the regions have disgraceful conditions and not one have been asked to leave. What does a schoolteacher know about the management of health institutions? It's just politics over people. The political pie will come to an end one day and I can't wait!" exclaimed one online writer. "I am deeply alarmed and concerned about what is happening in our health system- it seems we are trending backwards instead of moving forward. Winning election is more important than the care of our people..." added another.

3.3. Basket to carry water

Health care providers are asked to work miracles and make tough, life-changing decisions with very limited resources as understood in the proverbial phrase "basket to carry water" in the execution of duties for health promotion, restoration, and rehabilitation.

3.4. Resource shortage

Online commentators voiced their disgust as they watched the demonstration of opulence by the political directorate and the suffering of those who are forced to use the inadequate facilities: "Medical personnel are asked to do the impossible. This, while

politicians and their cronies drive around in state-funded SUVs along with perks.... How about eliminating some of the pricey perks and fund our hospitals....” questioned one commentator.

Notwithstanding, what has emerged from the current crisis is the real state of our healthcare system. It’s broken and the collateral damage made worse by piling up the shortcomings under the rug. Administrators, having to choose which baby gets incubated is scandalous but not uncommon in third world setting, added another.

Of general deep concern among online readers was the need for transparency versus opacity, that is, acknowledging the inefficiencies in the system rather than declaring that the health sector was functioning well: “ICUs are expensive resources and some countries should not pretend that they have them! Hanging a sign on a wall that says, "ICU" does not mean that it functions as one!”

One commentator was of the view that medical practitioners without an attribute of omniscience were forced to play God in saving those patients who they believed had a chance of survival:

“Can you imagine how distressing this has been for the health professionals to be making these choices when we all know that every human being deserve to live?”

When you see the opulent behaviour of the individuals that say they are administering the affairs of the people and this country over the years and the fact that we are short of so many pieces of life saving equipment that lead to individuals in hospitals making life and death decisions, it just shows how perverse the situation has become,” said another commentator.

A general consensus was that if the government really cared about the wellbeing of its people and would be willing to lead less affluent lives, such resources could be re-allocated for the greater good of society, in particular the neonatal ICUs.

3.5. Fyahpon di incompetents (Jamaican Creole - Fire for those who are incompetent)

Online commentators voiced their thoughts on the actions of government and the hospital administrators in lining their coffers and securing their own positions and not caring for the society or representing their constituents. The people were not on their priority list. One outraged writer berated the selfish and irresponsible behaviour of the political leaders when he declared:

“These politicians and public workers don't see themselves as public SERVANTS. They see themselves as public KINGS. Yes fyahpon all di incompetents useless ones.” Another writer expressed the attitude of entitlement that accompanies an elected position, “They enjoy power, prestige, and pay but they don't want the responsibilities,” and another “most of these people are political appointees, they are protected by higher ups...when people in high position screw-up they should be dismissed, if they are not dismissed, things will remain the same.”

Another commentator had a personal appeal for the Minister of Health, “Please do the right thing and step down before you allow your ignorance to jeopardize hundreds of lives.”

Other writers expressed exasperation, indicating that they were at breaking point and were incapable of dealing with further inefficiency on the part of the leaders. “When is enough, actually enough...do us a favour and resign because you seem to be the greatest national security risk to Jamaica right,” said one.

“This woman [hospital official] would have to tek-way herself [resign]. From the top nuh good de bottom wost,” said one irate writer referring to the natural rippling effect of weakness from poor leadership down the chain of command in any organisation.

“...You should all have been really run out of town, fired for the tragedy you all presided over, but maybe the Jamaican people will wake up and turn the 9- day wonder into a \$9 billion dollar lawsuit...,” added another commentator, referring to a comment about the concern regarding the death of the newborns only lasting for a short period. Other commentators were just as vocal in their condemnation of the authorities:

Health Minister] you should do the honourable thing and resign. It was under your watch 18 babies died. Three babies dying is probably an accident but 18.....???We can no longer trust that system if you steering the ship... If you have empathy and understand the agony of what the parents of these babies are going through you would do the honourable thing and resign.

I knew it and have been saying it for a long time. The Minister, his CMO (Chief Medical Officer) and PS (Permanent Secretary) must go now. The lying and cover-up must stop. This is the same crew that caused undue hardship on the public arising from the Chik-V outbreak. They must be held to account and public servants must be made to understand that any attempt to lie and hide information from the taxpayers come at a cost. That Ministry needs new leadership and new technocrats. This saga is taking a darker and darker turn. The truth must come out, and will come out. The Minister and his senior team must release the audit report in its original and full format and they should all resign from their positions,” wrote one contributor implying that the authorities were making efforts to conceal the truth.

“Am sick of this government. No one gets reprimanded or fired... the arrogance, the contempt, the ignorance, the failures. Mercy!” said another.

4. Discussion

This study examined the power of the news media in shaping the views of Jamaican online newspaper readers on a topic of national concern. Our analysis suggests that the embeddedness of media in the daily lives of Jamaicans attenuates the authority of traditional news media. This idea was clear in the immediate and multiple responses to what became known as the dead babies scandal. Also, the Agenda- Setting theory postulates that traditional media are influential in determining discourse in the public sphere, for while the media do not attempt to establish how people respond to the news reports, they provide the basis for thought processes. Additionally, Hjarvard (2008) and Castells (2000) brought to view that

astute online commentators have their own conversations and conduct them on multiple platforms. So the public is the recipient of both forums instantaneously resulting in immediate call to action, displeasure at unethical practices and highlighting of resource challenges. The many volatile arguments disturbed the atmosphere, but when the dust settled, the deep concerns surrounded the ripple effects relating to compromising care, dereliction of duty, basket to carry water and fyahpon di incompetents.

The media in carrying out their professional responsibilities based on their scope of practice reported on the events in a fair and balanced way. However, the commentators did not hesitate to voice their strong opinions on the sensitive matter especially when human lives were compromised. The online writers became the voice of the bereaved families, many of whom did not have the resources to seek professional help or to publicise the pain that accompanied the loss of their newborns. They called to account the source of leadership in the Ministry of Health, blaming the officials for their incompetence, partisanship in the allocation of resources, and management in the neonatal Intensive Care Unit. It seemed to the angry citizens that those in charge were more concerned with their security of tenure, and that of their political supporters than the prevailing abysmal conditions in the hospitals, which reduced professionalism to guesswork. “Fyahpon de incompetents” speaks to the zero tolerance Jamaicans have for elected officials who assured a better life for citizens at election, but once in office fail to keep their promise and instead seemed to focus more on the exhibition of their affluent lifestyles than on the job they are compensated to perform.

The result of this study demonstrates the need for the Jamaican news to take cognisance of the advances in technology and the speed at which non-journalists are able to voice their passion in the public, which might be used to hold political leaders at ransom. In 2017, one National Security advisor to the President of the United States of America had to resign following the dozens of illegal activities that the media uncovered. Such action by the advisor could potentially expose the vulnerabilities of the United States of America, The media’s relentless probing of questionable relevant issues serves a two-fold purpose, for in addition to accountability, the media identify veracity and serve as a vanguard protecting the rights of citizens. Often, the media are demonised by the perpetrators but applauded by the voting constituents whom the governments are sworn to serve in democratic societies. So the extensive media and public outcry in the “Dead Babies Scandal” resulted in the resignation of the Minister of Health and reevaluation of practices and policies at the hospitals went into high gear.

A limitation of this study is its analysis of one mainstream medium (Print) and the online feedback generated. A useful addition to these findings would involve conducting an intermedia agenda setting study, such as investigating how the public health crisis was treated in the broadcast media and on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, where news cycles and citizen engagement were more rapid and theme-diverse. An additional objective of such an investigation would be to study the communication patterns of elite commentators within these networks to examine the agenda-setting processes within particular kinds of Web communities.

In conclusion, our qualitative analysis of comments suggested a chaotic, diverse communication pattern driven by salient-at-the-moment topics, dynamic blogger communities and a culture of political lampooning. The environment is one in which traditional information purveyors struggle to have their message heard above the din, while users comfortable with the Web 2.0 environment exploit the real-time facility of information production, consumption and dissemination with ease. “Media have transformed society from a situation of information scarcity to one of information abundance, which has rendered attention a strategic resource, for which anyone with a message must compete,” (Hjavarð, 2008, p. 107). With the ongoing pressures on traditional news media organisations, such as the *Gleaner* and *JamaicaObserver*, to maintain circulation rates and readership, credibility and relevance, Web communities are likely to flourish in the independence offered by the online space. However, the participatory freedom permitted by the Web may not cultivate the cohesive discourse usually associated with societal change and the original intent of the Agenda-Setting Theory.

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