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**THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS IN A
PANDEMIC ERA: A CASE STUDY OF GHANA HEALTH SERVICE**

BY

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DECLARATION

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I Augustina Yawa Dansu, hereby declare that this dissertation is my original research conducted under the supervision of Dr. Albert Adjei Anani-Bossman. All quotations and references contained in published works have been identified and dully acknowledged, and has not been submitted in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.

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SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this work was supervised in accordance with the laid-down guidelines by the Ghana Institute of Journalism.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my entire family especially my dearest husband, Mr. Dickson Nuku Dansu, my three wonderful children, Deborah Mawudinam Dansu, Collins Amenuveve Dansu and Emmanuel Edem Dansu. My beloved mother, Madam Mary Sitsofe Gablibo, my younger sister, Albertina Emefa Sapeh, my wonderful sister-in-law, Mrs. Olivia Kafui Yamoah and my niece, Esther Etornam Adzimah, and finally my mother-in-law, Mrs. Paulina Agbavor. I am indeed grateful for the tremendous support. May the Almighty God continue to bless and keep us all for His glory

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus disease has ravaged the world with a surge in the number of cases and deaths recorded daily. The situation has instilled fear and anxiety in many people, causing them to rely on information from various sources including social media, leading to the propagation of fake news and complicating authentic public health messages. The study sought to investigate the key roles of Public Relations practitioners in their quest to fight the spread of fake news, focusing on the Ghana Health Service. It adopted the qualitative approach with data collected through interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide and analysis of documents. Findings show that, delays in authentic and evidence-based information from health officials coupled with fear and anxiety, led many people to circulate just any information accessed on vast media platforms. The Ghana Health Service public relations practitioners devised various measures and strategies including monitoring of traditional and social media, and developing suitable messages to counter any untrue or filtered information sighted on the deadly disease, to curb and mitigate its effects. Various channels were used in the dissemination of accurate information including national and community television and radios, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the Websites and blogs of the Ministry. Even though the health public relations practitioners achieved their aim, they encountered challenges that threatened their success. For instance in line of duty, pressure was mounted on the public relations practitioners due to the issue of understaffing at the unit. There was an issue of difficulties in influencing the perceptions of people with credible messages and getting them to change their behavioural patterns. The study also revealed how public relations are positioned at top management level but merely observers at management's deliberations. The study also confirmed the relevance of two-way communication due to its nature of receiving feedbacks as a result of engaging with the publics of the Ministry. The study concludes that, the public relations practitioners of the Ghana Health Service will maintain their position of being at the fore, to relentlessly communicate credible and authentic messages to its publics through traditional and social media platforms until the pandemic becomes history.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the study provides the various areas and components intended to be tackled. These include Background to the Study, Statement of the Problem to shed light on the issues at hand that require attention, Objectives of the Study, Research Questions, Significance of the Study, Scope of the Study and Organization of the Study.

1.2 Background to the Study

The world is currently ravaged by Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic with high surge in the number of cases and deaths recorded daily. The situation has instilled fear and anxiety in many people, causing them to rely on information from various sources including social media, leading to the propagation of fake news and complicating authentic public health messages (Rubal, Kanozia; Sukhmani, Kaur; Ritu, Arya, 2021). The novel Corona Virus Disease of 2019 was formerly referred to as '2019 novel coronavirus or 2019-nCov' with reports from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicating that the new virus has a link to the same family of viruses as, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold (Lisa, 2020). It is believed to have originated from a seafood and wildlife market in China, precisely Wuhan in December 2019. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the flu is an infectious disease which is basically passed on from an infected person to another. It was indicated that most

infected people will experience symptoms from mild to severe respiratory illnesses, some of which may require special treatment and some, not. According to the report from WHO, older people with underlying conditions are highly susceptible to the disease. The WHO admonishes that the best way to prevent and slow down transmission is for the general public to be amply informed about the virus, and how best individuals can protect themselves from being infected (World Health Organization, 2020). Globally, statistics on the pandemic flu currently stands at over 164 million cases with recorded deaths of over 3.4 million people (Worldometer, 2021). Narrowing it down to Africa, cases stand at approximately 4.7million with over 127 thousand deaths (Galal, 2021), and finally in Ghana, total cases recorded are approximately 93,450 with 783 deaths (Worldometer, 2021). The high number of cases and deaths as recorded above may partly be due to misinformation and disinformation that run rife on many communication outlets which tend to downplay the preventive precautions to be adhered to. This may be due to lack of readily available information which will serve as solution and guide to protect oneself from a peculiar pandemic of this nature, and absence of clinical reports to effectively support certain claims of health experts on timely basis. According to Wang et al, (as cited in Baines & Robert, 2020), the failure of quick responses by health communication experts and PR practitioners have created a gap in the communication procedures from sources to the general public and has resulted in misinformation and disinformation. Death rates in Africa is atypical with low records, but with relatively high number of cases recorded, binding on PR practitioners to communicate timely in order for Africa to avoid the worst effects of the pandemic (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2021). In Ghana the situation is not different since delayed relevant information cuts across the board in the world. Thus the outbreak of fake news is another dimension of crisis to the existential pandemic (Rubal, Kanozia; Sukhmani, Kaur; Ritu, Arya, 2021). According to Justice (2017), many scholars in Public

Relations (PR) believe that the best and promising way to build and maintain relationships between organizations and its publics, is effective communication. It is key to the success of Public Relations. However, messages that are intended to make build a unifying bond and consensus between organization and its publics is often misunderstood due to a big drop between the sender and the receiver and especially, the processes involved in sending those messages (Aleksander, 2016). For example, noise around a medium of communication downgrades the quality of message being sent. This results in the recipient, decoding the meaning of the message differently from its intended meaning and distorting it further. Apart from noise which distorts messages, Arto Mustajoki highlighted some common reasons why messages are misunderstood. According to him, interpretations that are subject to an individual's environment and reality tends to contribute to filtering messages. Language diversity and limitation to vocabulary are strong factors that must not be undermined (Jäntti, 2020). These factors among many others that distort messages, hinder the effectiveness of communication during crisis situations. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2009) assert that, Public Relations as a profession, is often either misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted (cited in Justice, 2017). Misunderstanding of a message is a situation that gravitates its interpreters to be economical with the truth. Hence, spreading false news.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Many governments including Ghana are faced with the reality of misinformation and disinformation in the midst of chaos, which the WHO describes as Infodemic – where information is over-abundant, some accurate and some inaccurate (Media Foundation for West Africa, n.d.). In the early days of the pandemic, due to delay in relaying updates on covid19 patients, some false

publications regarding their recovery emerged from YEN.com online news portal and BBC Pidgin issued a disclaimer to counter the misinformation. According to Habib (2020), much of what Ghanaians know about the coronavirus is misinformation, with the leading myths being that spraying alcohol on one's body can kill the virus and that eating garlic helps prevent infection. In other misinformation stances, the emergence of 5G technology is attributed to Covid19. These and many other misinformation widely circulated on social media, distorting accurate information on the deadly virus. Misinformation is very dangerous and even deadly during an outbreak. There is a positive assumption that people tend to act right when they are properly informed especially when important information about the health and lifestyle of the masses are made available to them. In a bid to tackle the overabundance of information on covid-19, which is spreading misinformation and disinformation, making it more difficult for the public to identify verified facts and advice from trusted sources, the World Health Organization (WHO) started a joint '*Stop The Spread*' campaign in May 2020 by working with national health authorities worldwide to provide accurate information to the publics (World Health Organization, 2021). But delays in processing authentic information caused wrong information to spread out rapidly to cover for the gap created, leaving information seekers to always be on the urge as and when any news on the disease comes up. In Ghana not much has been said about public relations in that regard since the problem at hand is a collective one. Albeit the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), supported by STAR Ghana Foundation, rolled out a project funded by the UKAID and the EU, to support public education on covid-19 and to fight misinformation that came with it. Since radio remains the most dominant source of information to many indigenes, 50 radio stations were partnered with, across the country, with targets to reach semi literates and rural dwellers who are most at risk of fake news (Fact Check Ghana| MFWA, 2020). In addition to that, a covid-19 fact-checking instrument

and the website (www.fact-checkghana.com) were developed to help fact-checkers accurately fact-check claims and other viral messages on the disease. About fifty (50) journalists across the country were recruited and trained in that regard. Two (2) experienced journalists and a health communication expert were contracted as editors of fact-checked reports before publication (Fact Check Ghana| MFWA, 2020). More so, Joy News, a leading media outlet in Ghana also joined in the campaign against fake news by embarking on a project dubbed, ‘Combating Fake News Project’. In a footage published on 28th May 2020, the news team explored the issues of alcohol use and corona virus, with inhabitants of Chokor, a suburb in the Accra Metropolis. The locality was under the conviction that, taking local gin will build immunity against the virus (Joy Online, 2020). The study therefore seeks to describe and shed light on the key PR practices and measures being adopted by the Ghana Health Service in the fight against misinformation and disinformation still in circulation during the Covid19 pandemic, to mitigate the health crisis situation.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Equity-informed infodemic response should be of paramount importance in order to prevent misinformation and ensure mechanisms through which the public can access correct information are easily accessible by all, especially the vulnerable and marginalized populations, and protect them from ill effects of infodemic. Due to that, the study seeks to:

1. Identify factors and sources of information that may be responsible for misinformation and disinformation.
2. Investigate the key roles of PR practitioners in the GHS in the fight against misinformation and disinformation in a pandemic.

3. Identify the communication processes and measures by PR practitioners in the Ghana Health Service to curb the level of misinformation and disinformation on covid19 and mitigate the health crisis situation.

1.5 Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives above, the following questions are posed;

1. What factors and sources of information may be responsible for misinformation and disinformation of covid19?
2. What are the key roles of PR practitioners in the GHS in fighting misinformation and disinformation in a pandemic?
3. Which communication processes and measures were adopted by PR practitioners in the Ghana Health Service to curb the level of misinformation and disinformation on covid19 and mitigate the health crisis situation?

1.6 Significance of the Study

Misinformation and disinformation, simply referred to as infodemic creates uncertainty and anxiety among people aside what is already being suffered by the outbreak of the deadly virus. This situation requires urgent need for stronger action and coordinated approaches to manage it by involving all actors. In that regard, it is thus imperative to identify the factors responsible for fake news and pinpoint key roles of Public Relations during an outbreak of a pandemic and strategies to ameliorate the effects of fake news. This will help in clearly dichotomizing what has been done already and what is yet to be done and defining the way forward for Public Relations practitioners

when it comes to crisis communication and give insights on what the key roles of Public Relations are, with regard to strategies in fighting misinformation and disinformation during pandemic and bringing to the fore, the pertinence of Public Relations in the dissemination of authentic information. The communication processes and measures by Public Relation practitioners to curb the level of misinformation and disinformation on covid19 to mitigate the health crisis situation will also be highlighted, and serve as a go-to and generally accepted procedure in crisis management. This will bridge the delayed gap created in conveying scientific and evidence-based facts on the virus and other crisis communication messages. And finally, the outcome of this study is expected to broaden the horizon on key roles of Public Relations and crisis communication, and also serve as a basis for other related studies.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study will focus on Public Relations practice within the Ghanaian context. Specifically, on the key roles of Public Relations within the Ghana Health Service (GHS). The strategies, nature and processes of communication will be looked at in the organization. For the purpose of this study, approximately two (2) Heads of Public Relations practitioners will be interviewed to elicit the necessary information. Justification for this choice is because the Public Relations practitioner's heads possess the wealth of knowledge on Public Relations practices and provide all the relevant information that will be needed.

1.8 Organization of the Study

The study is being organized into five chapters with Chapter one dealing with the background to the study, statement of the research problem, the research objectives and questions, significance of the study, scope of the study and finally organization of the study. Chapter two intends to deal with literature review, the theoretical framework, and review of related and relevant literature. Chapter three will tackle the methodology, approach, research design, the population, sampling method, sample size, data collection instruments and finally data analysis. Chapter four is purposely intended to analyze the findings of the research and Chapter five summarizes the findings, draws conclusions, and provide suggestions for further studies.

1.9 Operational Definition of Concepts

Public Relations: In this study, Public Relations means using effective communication and strategies to build and maintain cordial relationship between an organization and its publics.

Practitioner: Practitioner means anybody who is engaged by an organization for Public Relations roles.

Pandemic: It means an outbreak of an infectious and deadly disease that has spread across boundaries of continents. Precisely, Corona Virus Disease – 2019.

Fake News: An information that is misleading and can cause harm.

Infodemic: Adopted from the World Health Organization, it means overabundance of information, some accurate, and some not, that occurs during an epidemic.

Misinformation: In this study, it means the spread of false information without an intention to cause damage but turns out to be very dangerous.

Disinformation: Means the deliberate spread of false and inaccurate information to cause harm to the user.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Literature review according to Efron and Ravid (2019), is systematically reviewing and critically analyzing scholarly literatures related to one's topic. They assert that in reviewing a literature, a critical, comprehensive and accurate understanding of the current state of knowledge, comparison of research studies and theories, and gaps in the literatures under review must be revealed. And in furtherance, they noted the importance of indicating what needs to be done to step forward what is already known in the subject area. Dave (2020), also submits that, a literature review, reviews and summarizes what has been published by others on a subject without aspiring to provide any novel analytical insight. Following from the above, scholarly articles related to key roles of Public Relations and management of fake news will be reviewed critically. And as indicated by Efron and Ravid (2019), this exercise will purposely help in setting up the context and theoretical framework for the topic under study.

2.1.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1.1 Introduction

Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995) insist that Public Relations Practitioners must use theories to provide a perspective about why and how Public Relations is practiced. More importantly, theories help to explain how to make Public Relations more effective for organizations and society. The

scholars point out that theories can help to predict the way things work or happens because they provide an understanding of the relationship between actions and events. This study employs the Early Warning Systems and Actor- Network theories in analyzing the findings.

2.1.2 Early Warning Systems Theory

The theoretical perspective underpinning the study is The Early Warning System (EWS) - Boundary Spanning Role of Public Relations. A universally accepted definition of Early Warning System (EWS) does not exist yet. However, there is already a proliferation of early warning systems in the international community for dealing with different challenges and are used to guide the actions of individuals, groups, institutions and governments. Purvis and Busby (2004) define it to be “The provision of timely and effective information, through identifying institutions, that allow individuals exposed to a hazard to take action to avoid or reduce their risk and prepare for effective response”. Kapucu and Wart (2006) assert that frequent and disastrous crisis have increased the role of Public Relations in managing crisis and emergencies. The purpose of this information is to enable individuals, communities and organizations that are threatened, to prepare and act appropriately within insufficient time available to reduce the possibility of harm.

However, according to Garcia and Fearnley (2012), the magnitude of designing the task, implementing, and sustaining Early Warning Systems in Organizations is enormous. They continued that effective Early Warning System policy process also requires Organizational participation to ensure that Publics and institutions are adequately informed and alerted. Early Warning System in public relations according to Chaves & De Cola (2017), represents the set of capacities needed to generate and disseminate timely and meaningful warning information that

enables at-risk individuals, communities and organizations to prepare and act appropriately and in sufficient time to reduce harm or loss. Based on this definition, the annual report of the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies (IFRC) (2012), outlined four (4) complete and effective inter-related key elements of Early Warning System, and they are;

- Risk Knowledge – It is the process of spanning knowledge of crisis and vulnerabilities through to preparedness and the capacity to respond. Best practice of Early Warning Systems also has strong inter-linkages and effective communication channels between all of the elements. This assessment provides essential information to set priorities for mitigation, prevention strategies, and designing Early Warning Systems.
- Systems with monitoring and predicting capabilities is the second element established to provide timely estimates of the potential crisis faced by institutions.
- Thirdly, communication systems are needed for delivering warning messages to potentially affected units of the population. The messages need to be reliable, synthetic, and simple in order for public to understand.
- Finally, coordination and appropriate action plans are key points in effective Early Warning Systems. Likewise, public awareness and education are critical aspects of crisis management.

The four key elements according to Chaves & De Cola (2017), include on one hand, the gathering, processing and presentation of information in a consistent and meaningful manner to allow the generation of alert messages and, on the other hand, the generation and transmission of alert messages to the citizens at risk by means of warning communication. Relatively in Ghana, Udo and Jungermann (2016), indicate that, Ghana is a country frequently struck by natural disasters

like floods and droughts. Thus timely warning or detection of such disasters will mitigate the negative impact on lives and property if Early Warning Systems are in place. However, they asserted that, local data and monitoring systems necessary to provide such a warning are hardly available. The availability and improvement of internet, mobile phones and satellites have provided new possibilities for disaster warning systems in data-scarce regions such as Ghana. Udo and Jungermann continued that, *The Early Warning Systems provide a flood or drought hazard warning on sub-catchment level and links the warning to a more detailed flood or drought risk map, to enable the disaster coordinator to send warnings or relieve more efficiently to areas that have the highest risk. This is especially relevant because some areas for which the system is implemented are very remote. The system is developed and tested to be robust and operational especially in remote areas. This means that the necessary information is also available under limited internet conditions and not dependent on local computer facilities. In many rural areas in Ghana communities rely on indigenous knowledge when it comes to flood or drought disaster forecasting* (Udo & Jungermann, 2016). Udo and Jungermann concluded that the Early Warning Systems has a feature that allows indigenous knowledge indicators to be taken into account in the warning and makes easy comparison possible with the satellite based warnings. At a conference in March 2006, themed, Developing Early Warning Systems: A Checklist, it emerged that, *Early warning is a major element of disaster risk reduction. It prevents loss of life and reduces the economic and material impact of disasters. For it to be effective, early warning systems need to actively involve the communities at risk, facilitate public education and awareness of risks, effectively disseminate messages and warnings and ensure there is constant state of preparedness.* At the conference, some three (3) strategic indicators were highlighted to get an Early Warning Systems operationally effective. Illustrating them with the pandemic, they are; indicator (1),

highlighted that the four (4) key elements of Early Warning System must be people-centered. This is aimed at empowering individuals and communities threatened during a pandemic to act in sufficient time and in an appropriate manner to reduce the possibility of personal injury, loss of life and damage to property and the environment. With indicator (2), it was recommended that cross-cutting issues must be taken into account when designing and maintaining effective early warning systems. This strategy can help counter the propagation of fake news during a pandemic. And finally on indicator (3), attention was called to the need to consider key actors (for instance communities, local and national governments, Institutions and Organizations, the Private sector, NGOs and International bodies) when developing and implementing an effective early warning system because, the contribution and coordination of a diverse range of individuals and groups are required to set up a rich system.

Following from that, Broom and Sha (2012), claim that Public Relations action is “socially responsible acts taken by public relations departments or other parts of organization which require action strategies that typically include changes in an organization’s policies, procedures, products, services, and behavior. These changes are designed to achieve program objectives and organizational goals, while at the same time responding to the needs and well-being of an organization’s publics and society in entirety. In short, corrective actions serve the mutual interests of an organization and its publics. The Early Warning Systems are a critical life-saving tool for disasters. Hence very significant in health crisis communication. When effectively deployed, thereby coordinating all components efficiently, will help Public Relations practitioners or crisis communicators to provide the general public with timely, evident-based information on the potential threats or risks of an outbreak. This will allow the public to adapt to changes and know how to mitigate the health crisis situation.

2.1.3 Actor-Network Theory

The Actor-Network theory, is a social theory propounded by French Sociologist Von Bruno Latour (1987). Latour designed this theory with the concept of constantly shifting relationships of networks that exist in the social and natural worlds such that, nothing exists outside those relationships. The Actor-Network theory explains how material–semiotic networks come together to act as a whole; the clusters of actors involved in creating meaning are both material and semiotic. According to Mike (2017), Actor-Network theory scholars were concerned to trace the ways in which laboratory practices, and the sorts of materials that circulated through the space of the laboratory served in the accreditation of scientific knowledge as ‘objective’. Mike continued that, scientists were not seen as having some sort of ‘direct’ access to nature but rather, derived – *constructed* – scientific knowledge through activities that marshalled human, nonhuman and textual elements. The privileged space of this marshalling – which included assembling, combining, representing and circulating – was the laboratory. From this space, texts could be sent out into the world to persuade others of the ‘objectivity’ of the laboratory’s scientific knowledge. For Actor Network theory, the process of constructing scientific knowledge thus entailed both human and nonhuman elements, and as such stood in contrast from social constructionist perspectives that placed emphasis on social processes. This focus on the nonhuman – a term that covered animals, plants, environments, technologies – would subsequently be generalized to the analysis of the production of ‘social’ per se. Second, Actor Network theory’s focus on scientists’ circulation of texts, and their use in the ‘persuasion’ of others amounts to a microsocial view of social ordering. It suggests that others could not be ‘impelled’ to take scientific findings, arguments, or formulations seriously but had to be coached into doing so. According to Somerville (1999), a key feature of the actor-network approach is its resistance to modern reification of

boundaries which prevent us from seeing the ways in which the “social”, the “technical” and the “natural” are intermingled in a seamless web. This position is admittedly counterintuitive – for instance, as referred to both to machines and operators – but for Latour, these distinctions are not to be taken for granted; rather they should be seen as an achievement of the modern episteme which he calls the “modern constitution”. A typical analogy to explain this notion of the seamless web is a cake mixture. In a cake several different ingredients are mixed together – e.g. butter, flour, milk, eggs and chocolate – until they become a homogenous entity. Michael (1996) also re-describes the Actor-Network theory pointing out that there are three (3) key theoretical premises which must be adhered to in order to produce an actor-network account: They are: generalized agnosticism - which requires an analytic impartiality as to whatever actors are involved; generalized symmetry - which involves the use of an abstract and neutral vocabulary to understand the conflicting viewpoints of actors (i.e. the human and the non-human are analyzed with the same conceptual and terminological framework); and free association - which demands the repudiation of a priori distinctions between the social and the natural, and the technological. Callon and Latour posit that, the human and non-human relationship highlights that an actor is "any element which bends space around itself and makes other elements dependent upon itself by translating their will into a language of its own". As emphasized by Knorr-Cetina and Mulkay (1981), by translation all the negotiations are understood, the intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes or causes to be conferred on itself authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force. “Our interests are the same”, “do what I want”, “you cannot succeed without going through me”. This approach according to Callon (1986), emphasizes the interconnectedness of the heterogeneous elements that make up a network and this interconnectedness is elucidated in the process of translation. This process has been described as

pivotal in any analysis of how the different elements in an actor-network interact. In furtherance, translation in this context thus rests on the idea that actors within networks will try to redefine the meaning of other actors, “speak” on their behalf, and manipulate the other actors into positions with them. When an actor’s strategy is successful and it has organized other actors for its own benefit it can be said to have translated them (Somerville, 1999). Aylesworth-Spin (2017), lauds how science and technology bring non-humans into the human world. She indicates that Actor-Network theory promotes rich descriptions of how these connections lead to the formation of new entities. A computer and its human operator, for example, combine social and technological elements to achieve their newly shared “interests” of a working technology. Actor-Network theory is a social theory that treats all actors - people, objects and organizations in networks as equals because to understand outcomes, actors are less important than their actions. Actor Network theory is a useful methodological concept because it draws analytical attention to Public Relations and, media practices and behaviors normally viewed as commonplace and thus taken for granted. Given the trends in pandemics and other serious public health outbreaks such as Ebola and Zika, Public Relations practitioners can consider using this theory to examine their crisis communications plans and related activities. When Actor-Network theory was used to explore what went wrong and what ended up working during the 2009 swine flu outbreak, it became clear that actors constantly redefined each other through their independence. Effectively using Actor-Network theory can help reveal how a phenomenon is experienced among actors in different ways when multiple meanings are generated and suspended within the effects of a particular network.

2.2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.2.1 Defining Public Relations

Public Relations has numerous definitions. International Public Relations Association (IPRA) defines Public Relations as ‘a decision-making management practice tasked with building relationships and interests between organizations and their publics based on the delivery of information through trusted and ethical communication methods’. Gray et al. (2004) and, Tench and Yeomans (2009) also assert that, Harlow’s (Harlow, 1976: 36) definition of Public Relations contains overall goals and tasks of Public Relations. In his definition, Public Relations is a distinctive management function that helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinions, defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management, keep abreast of and effectively utilize change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools. Grunig & Hunt (1984), also indicate it is nearly impossible to come up with a single definition of Public Relations but assert that, in one way or the other Public Relations activities is part of the management of communication between an organization and its publics. Communication in this context is when people move messages to or from other people, thereby using that means to plan, manage and execute projects and programmes for organizations as a whole. In furtherance, Grunig and Hunt (1984), emphasized on the need for mutual understanding between an organization and its publics for communicated messages to be effective. Based on that, Broom and Sha (2012), opine that there is the need to understand the world around us and be able to argue for a particular worldview concept and relationships therein, thereby defining Public Relations in contemporary times as ‘the

management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends'. In conclusion, Public Relations according to Broom and Sha (2012), is that function of management that performs boundary spanning roles through effective communication, and uses feedbacks to plan and develop sustainable programmes with Public Relations tools, with the objective of building and maintaining relationships between an organization and its publics through a two (2)-way symmetrical communication model, and producing measurable changes in awareness, attitude and behaviours of publics.

2.2.2 Key Roles and Functions of Public Relations

According to Harold Burson (as cited in Broom & Sha, 2012), Public relations has matured into the role of helping organizations decide not only how to say something and what to say, but also what to do. He indicated that the early stages of Public Relations in the 1960s, crafted and distributed messages handed down from management. But social changes and evolutions changed the facets of Public Relations. An increasingly and unavoidable role Burson attributes to public's scrutiny of what organizations want to say and do, especially in crisis situations. Tench and Yeomans (2009) also posit that, most Public Relations practitioners are perceived as communicators involved in both manager and technician roles even though it is accepted that one role may dominate the other in entry of practice. The scholars expatiated four (4) dimensions as key roles of Public relations as follows:

- Managerial – these are important roles that contribute to helping organization's ideas about what it is, what it should do and what its publics want and expect from it, with regard to

developing communications objectives, establishing methods and policies to manage emergency situations and identify key publics and establish strategies for building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with those publics.

- Operational – these are more likened to technician roles but familiar with managerial roles by organizing and integrating communication activities through effective and reliable mediums.
- Reflective – is described as the role of analyzing ‘changing social values to adjust organizations, standards and values of social responsibility’ and is aimed at influencing the dominant coalition.
- Educational – are roles that aims to increase the communication competence of employees.

Grunig and Hunt (1984), also posit that as part of Public Relations managerial roles with regard to communication manager, Public Relations practitioners systematically plan and manage organization’s programmes and policies and categorizing the roles into three different kinds namely;

- Expert prescriber – where the practitioner functions as an expert who researches and defines programmes and solely takes responsibility in implementing them.
- Communication facilitator – a role that requires of the Public Relations practitioner to serve as a sensitive “go-between” to keep continuous two-way symmetrical communication flowing between the organization and its publics.
- Problem-solving process facilitator – in this sub role, the Public Relations practitioner helps others in the organization solve their public relations problems.

According to Grunig and Hunt, further research by David Dozier highlighted two (2) middle-level Public Relations management roles, namely;

Media relations role – which describes roles of practitioners who maintain contact with the media and keeps others in the organization informed about what the media is doing, and

The communication liaison role – In this role, the Public Relations practitioner serves higher-level Public Relations managers by representing the organization at events and meetings and creating opportunities for management to communicate with internal and external publics.

People confusing publicity as the main activity of Public Relations and referring to only that as Public Relations, is an instance cited by Broom and Sha (2012). Broom and Sha indicated that publicity is often the most visible part but seldom the only programme tactic. According to them, contemporary Public Relations concepts and practice require effective functionalities and efforts of Public Relations within an organization and are imperative before dealing with relationships outside the organization successfully. Some specialties outlined are:

- Employee Communication – is a critical dimension to an organization's success. Employee communication or internal relations is that specialized part of Public Relations, with practitioners working closely with Human Resource department to communicate about benefits, training, safety, and other topics important to employees, and builds and maintains a mutually beneficial relationship between managers and the employees on whom an organization's success depends.
- Publicity - is information provided by an outside source that is used by media because the information has news value. It is usually an uncontrolled method of placing messages in the media because the source does not pay media outlets for placement, and much of the news and information in the media originates from Public Relations and what is judged as news worthy.

2.2.3 Defining Crisis Communication

Fearn-Banks (2016), defines Crisis communication as “the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence”. McEntire (2015) posits that crisis management plan actually involves initiating a learning attitude throughout the organization, getting acceptance for the work, and doing the work together with others. In ‘The Handbook of Crisis Communication’, Coombs and Holladay (2012), explain the type of communication which revolves around these preparedness activities (pre-crisis phase) towards crisis as crisis communication. This includes the stakeholders’ training, “collection and processing of information for crisis team decision making along with the creation and dissemination of crisis messages to people outside of the team. According to Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2017), “Effective crisis communication starts long before a crisis hits an organization and should be a part of every organization’s business and strategic plans”. A crisis situation is one major force that can cause a change in any organization; a crisis is an enviable page in any organization history. This means there is no clear departure of the concept of crisis in an organization or institution. A crisis is a departure or expected and usual. In other words, it is dysfunctional and is a disturbance in the normal functioning of the organization. It is wise to comment that crisis and conflict occur because it is functional and strengthening for solid change as well as organizational change at a specific time. Herring (2009), describes three (3) distinct public relations crisis that can happen. They are:

- The Known (K) – this refers to a situation where the probability of a future event is known with sufficient certainty, and all parameters of the probability distribution with a high degree of confidence can be specified.

- The Unknown (u) – this is a situation where an event can be specified but there is considerable uncertainty about when or whether it may occur because of variety of alternative theories without consensus among experts about which is correct, or because of lack of adequate data or sufficiently powerful statistical techniques to estimate a distribution with even negligible levels of confidence
- The Unknowable (U) – refers to events that have not been identified because they have not happened or because there are no widely accepted theory that will lead management to expect that they might happen.

Crowe (2020), emphasizes that organizations must be prepared for the unknown by developing a strong communication plan that can help with survival in toughest times. According to her, there are various ways to approach the situation and highlights three (3) key elements of an effective crisis communications plan as follows:

- Anticipation of potential crisis: a typical example Crowe cited is the current pandemic. And according to her whether it is a product defect, a change in management, unhappy customers, inappropriate comment from a company executive or a natural disaster, organizations will face road bumps during operations, some of which can shake the business to the core. She continued that it is important to evaluate every possible scenario, and create an organized plan for each. Also key stakeholders must be identified, and a list of potential questions must be compiled. Spokesperson who will represent the organization in crisis situations as responders must be competent, proactive, transparent, admit accountability and avoid false optimism.

- A clear communication process: Crowe indicates that creating a forthright internal and external-facing team can help control the conversation and ensure that there is clear and consistent messaging. According to her, this essential step of internal organization includes establishing approved messaging, forming employee communication processes and identifying the order of approaching both internal and external communications.
- A sense of urgency: Crowe asserts that time is of the essence when dealing with a potential crisis, especially with regard to when crisis messages must be delivered with head-on issues to address the situation and acting swiftly. This requires the engagement of established communication protocols and circulating it as planned.

Salu (1994) emphasizes on the need for public relations plan indicating that, “the public relations experts who are managing a crisis should develop a crisis management plan and inform the external publics of the organization about the crisis as soon as possible so that the public would not receive the information elsewhere.” Regester and Larkin (2008), emphasize the importance of “Tell your own tale,” Tell it all” and Tell it fast.” This highlights the essential points in time of emergency which is immediate response, giving the media full accurate information, having technical information readily to hand and doing everything possible for the welfare of the victims and their relatives.

2.2.4 Misinformation and Disinformation (Fake News) – COVID19 Infodemic

Coronavirus disease is an unprecedented global health crisis that is having immeasurable consequences on economic and social well-being worldwide. Unfortunately, apart from the fight against the pandemic, false information is rapidly spreading and bringing some efforts of health

practitioners to keep the infectious disease under control, to null. Fake news According to Desai, Mooney, and Oehrli (2021), are those news stories that are false: the story itself is fabricated, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes. Where these stories sometimes may be propaganda that is intentionally designed to mislead the reader, or may be designed as a “clickbait” written for economic incentives (the writer profits on the number of people who click on the story). Information is basically facts that are accurately presented and transmitted in a sequential manner. However, Janich (2018), posit that when stories do not correspond to certain truth in the information, it becomes a myth. Misinformation according to World Health Organization (WHO) (2020), is false information that is created, not with the intention of hurting others and is often started by someone who genuinely wants to understand a topic and cares about keeping other people safe and well. It is then shared by others who feel the same. Everyone believes they are sharing good information – but unfortunately, they are not. And depending on what is being shared, the misinformation can turn out to be quite harmful. Disinformation unlike misinformation, is false information created with the intention of causing harm. That harm could be to a person, a group of people, an organization or even a country. Disinformation generally serves some agenda and can be very dangerous. The World Health Organization has lamented on witnessing the gravity of disinformation and misinformation that is eroding on their trust and in government and public institutions. According to del Rio and Malani (in Darrin & Robert, 2020), the initial growth of the virus, was exacerbated by inaction and an absence of reliable evidence on how best to control the worsening situation. Ashrafi-rizi and Kazempour (2020), express that as the disease spreads, exaggerated information and lack of trusted data hampered proper communication, delayed appropriate action and led to poor decision making. The initial production and publication of vast amounts of valid and invalid messages led to an over-consumption of information, which was

misleading, unsettling and confusing for a largely uninformed public. Geldsetzer (2020), laid emphasis on the fact that, the quantity and quality of information that people receive affect their knowledge and perceptions, which in turn affect their actions in relation to prevention and control. To buttress this claim, Long (2020) asserts that worldwide, the behavior of the general public has a direct impact on the course of the virus, through an instance of how rigorously social distancing rules are adhered to. Brennen et al (2020), emphasized on the need for timely production of conceptually sound definitions, since they will help communications platforms and fact checkers worldwide to improve their classifications of false COVID-19 information and with the much-needed task of unifying their working methods before dissemination.

2.2.5 Public Relations and Issues/ Crisis Management

Tench, and Yeomans (2009) emphasize the need for Public Relations practitioners to demonstrate their value to the employing organizations – whether it is reputation management or relationship building that they are offering. Neither is the comparison with financial or legal aspects of an organization misplaced. As Hutton (2001: 214) points out, the failure to have a clear rationale for Public Relations has led to erosion of its base indicating that, ‘many corporate public relations departments have lost responsibility for crisis communications to management consulting firms and marketing departments, some have lost responsibility for corporate identity programmes to marketing departments, some have lost government relations to legal departments, and some have lost internal/ employee communications to human resources departments. According to Froehlich & Rüdiger (2006), a Public Relations practitioner performs a service during a crisis by educating and informing the public. Fearn-Bank (2016) agrees that the job of the Public Relations practitioner is to communicate with various publics, which are specific audiences that are targeted by

communication products and programs. In a health crisis, the Public Relations practitioner targets the public to manage and sustain its reputation. The scholar emphasized that Public Relations practitioners do not control the image of an organization, instead, they communicate in an effort to improve or maintain its image. All too often reputation management is out of the practitioner's hands because organizations do not consider using Public Relations until they are in crisis. Alcibar (2008), Brewer and Ley (2010), Fursich and Lester (1996), Peláez, A. L., and Díaz J. A (2007), Spoel, Goforth, Cheu, & Pearson (2008), Wilcox (2003) collectively indicate that journalism has been a key site for communicating issues in health, medicine, and science to various non-scientific, or lay audiences. Yet, science journalists have a channel through which they are informed about topics in health, science, and medicine. Fjæstad (2007) asserts that while personal relationships between scientists and journalists and close reading of scientific publications are two avenues through which journalists are informed, Public Relations provides another informational resource for journalists. Public Relations exists in an intermediary or bridging position between two institutions (i.e., the disciplines that constitute journalism and health, medicine, and science) that have different sets of expectations and demands about what ought to be communicated and how it ought to be communicated. Göpfert (2007) indicated that, this position is complicated further by the shifting economic situation of journalism and evolving media platforms (e.g., from newspapers to television to web and social media) that alter the priorities of both scientists and journalists. Furthermore, Trench (2007) and Baines, Egan, and Jefkins (2004) emphasized that, Public Relations professionals have an obligation to the organization for whom they work, whether that organization is a government institution, a profit-oriented company, or a non-profit organization which influences how they respond to the respective demands of scientists and journalists. To make sense of the role Public Relations can play in health and risk message design, it requires

three (3) things: an understanding of the Public Relations field; the role of science and health Public Relation as an intermediary between science and journalism or the lay public; and the ways in which Public Relations professionals try to fulfil that role. Also Serrano (2008), claims that information, is a match or a mismatch mechanism in communication systems that shapes objects, things, or situations that we do not know. It provides people the guarantee to imagine and reconstruct something that is already new or it is happening. It is an element that relates to and affects behaviour of structures; a variable for management and control that contributes to the operation of systems. Serrano continues that, Media representations usually become important references of information for audiences in public health situations. Media references are images that overlap data value and become articulating units that determine behaviours and perceptions of society. Although information can come from different institutions, organizations, or systems, media often may refer to as the main references that perpetuate "the images of reality." The absence of information blurs referents and generates dissonance. The same occurs if data is incomplete, implausible, inconsistent, or pretentious, such that, produced dissonance caused by images of media, tend to occupy the mind of the viewer. This, according to Serrano, manipulated data, imaginaries and believes become the illegitimate representation of something that does not correspond to reality, a worthless element for any communication. In the context of health contingencies, corporate communication issued by ministries and public health institutions lose distinction, control, and credibility when its role is not distinguished from the actions of simple media. Its reason, the unexpected effects shared by the press, radio, and television spread panic and uncertainty among populations. Public health crisis spread through images. Through the construction and reproduction of social imaginaries, its magnitude can affect the physical form of society as well as the physiological state of its populations. Social order is constrained by "rational"

threats perceived by humans, as well as their representations. Broom and Sha (2012) buttress that, organization should implement corrective internal actions before reaching out to external publics with its communication efforts. In any case, action and communication strategies should be coordinated, so that they do not contradict.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Research methodology is the systematic adoption of procedures and techniques, to process and solve an identified research problem. According to Connaway & Powell (2010), research methodology refers to the strategies surrounding the use of multiple methods of conducting a research study as required by different attempts to achieve a high degree of reliability and validity.

This chapter examined the study's design and approach, population, sample size, sampling method, data collection methods/instrument, procedures for data collection, techniques for data analysis, validity and reliability of the study, as well as ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Design

According to Creswell (2014), research design is the conceptual framework of research, which shows how all components of the research fit together logically to address the problem. Durrheim (2006), also asserts that it is a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between research questions and the execution of the research. The purpose of research design according to Zikmund and Babin (2007), is to present a master plan that will specify the methods for collecting and analyzing information. According to Jovancic (2020), there are five (5) ways to classify research design as follows; Correlational research design; Experimental research design; Diagnostic research design – (i) problem inception, (ii) problem diagnosis, and (iii) problem solution; Explanatory research design and; Descriptive research design.

This study adopted the descriptive research design under the qualitative research method to describe the problem; by gathering, analyzing and presenting data collected. Qualitative research method according to Silverman (2019), is the type of research that finds out about people's experiences and concerned with subjective meanings to reality, and helps to understand what is important for people. The above enabled insights into answering *why* and *how* questions.

Following from that, Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott, and Davidson (2002), indicate that qualitative research approach is used to uncover trends in thoughts and opinions on a phenomenon through observation, interviews, open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions. Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020), emphasize that, the most common methods of data collection are document study, non-participant or participant observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. And also indicated that for data analysis, field-notes and audio-recordings are transcribed into protocols and transcripts, and coded using qualitative data management software. The submissions above supported the need to collect data by interviewing individuals who are expertise in the Public Relations jurisdiction and possess wealth of information that will enrich the study. This enabled an in-depth analysis of Public Relations practices in the Ghana Health Services and examined the strategies they adopted to fight fake news in the wake of the pandemic.

3.2 Case Study

Creswell (2014), asserts that a case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates contemporary phenomenon within a real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. Gerring (2004) argues that, a case study can best defined as an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units. According to

him, they rely on the same sort of co-variational evidence utilized in non-case study research. Thus, a case study method should be correctly understood as a particular way of defining cases, not a way of analyzing cases or a way of modeling causal relations. To clarify the above, Creswell (2014) opines that a case study is a design of enquiry found in many fields, especially those that help to develop in-depth analysis of a case. This case could be a programme, an activity, an event, process or one or more individuals. Following from the above, this study sought to gain in-depth knowledge of Public Relations practices and strategies adopted in the dissemination of accurate and timely information, and how fake news is managed.

3.3 Population

Population, as defined by Ofori and Dampson (2011), is the universe of units from which a sample is selected. According to Bless and Higgon-Smith (2000), the population for a study refers to the entire set of objects or people which is the focus of a research. Gravatter and Forzano (2006), explain that a population is the entire individuals of interest to a researcher. Burns and Grove (2003), also point out that the population of a study basically refers to all the elements that the researcher believes meet the eligibility criteria to be included in a study. This study's population was targeted to be the list of all members of the Public Relations department of the Ghana Health Service, as claimed by Nworgu (2006) that, a target population refers to the entire group, individuals or objects that is intended to be studied. The target population usually has varying characteristics. Narrowing it down, Nworgu continues that an accessible population of a study on the other hand is the population that is defined in terms of those members in the group within the reach for the study. That notwithstanding, the accessible population were participants who were

readily available in the Public Relations Unit in the Ghana Health Service and had wealth of information.

3.4 Sampling Method

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), sampling method is a technique that guides the choices of what to observe or whom to interview. Shantikumar and Barratt (2018) also indicate that it is a method that allows researchers to infer information about a population based on results from a subset of the population, without having to investigate every individual. They added that sampling technique merits researcher's workload, reduces cost and makes it easier to obtain high quality information. In conformity to what social sciences' scholars have said, they assert that, there are several different sampling techniques, and can be subdivided into two (2) groups namely; (1) Probability (random) sampling and (2) Non-probability sampling.

Probability sampling, according to Etikan and Bala (2017), is the process where a researcher starts with a complete sampling frame of all eligible individuals from which the sample is selected. By this, all eligible individuals have a chance of being chosen for the sample, and results from the study will be generalized (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Probability sampling include systematic, stratified, simple random, and cluster sampling. Etikan and Bala (2017), equally define Non-probability sampling as a procedure that will not bid a basis for any opinion of probability that elements in the population will have a chance to be included in the study's sample. The four (4) types according to Shantikumar and Barratt (2018) are quota, convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling. This study will adopt the purposive sampling method, precisely snowball sampling technique, which Venette (2013) indicates that, it is when a group of people or an

individual participant recommends potential participants for a study, or directly recruits them for the study. Those participants then recommend additional participants, and so on, thus building up like a snowball rolling down a hill. Snowball sampling was equally opted for, because of its simplicity and cost efficiency, and it helped to easily access the Public Relations practitioners who possessed wealth of information required for this study.

3.5 Sample Size

Kusi (2012), points out that in considering a sample size for a qualitative study, it is imperative to determine an aspect of the population to be used in the study and justify why they have chosen such a sample size. The scholar argues further that selecting a large number of interviewees for a qualitative research improves the validity and reliability of a research. However, Silverman (2010) argues that although the validity of qualitative analysis depends on the sample size, the quality of the analysis is also significant. Based on these assertions, the sample size for this study was four (4) Public Relations Practitioners in the Ghana health Service, with certainty on new insights and wealth of information.

3.6 Data Collection Method

Data collection is a process of collecting information from all relevant sources to find answers to research problem under study, test hypothesis and evaluate the outcomes (Dudovskiy, 2018). According to Dudovskiy (2018), data collection methods can be divided into two categories namely, primary method – the initial information gathering step, usually the first-hand data collected, and secondary method – the process of gathering information from data that has already

undergone statistical analysis. Dudovskiy (2018), continues to assert that, primary data can further be divided into two (2) groups namely, *quantitative data collection method* - based on mathematical calculations in various formats which include questionnaires with closed-ended questions, methods of correlation and regression, mean, mode and median and others, and *qualitative data collection method* - associated with words, sounds, feeling, emotions, colours and other elements that are non-quantifiable. According to Gill et al (2008), there are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research, and they include observations, textual or visual analysis (e.g. from books or videos) and interviews (individual or group). However, the scholars assert that, the most common methods adopted by many researchers, are interviews and focus groups (Gill et al, 2008). This is because, interviews and focus group ensure greater level of depth of understanding and often bring new information to light. In view of the above, the proposed method for data collection for this study were interviews and document analysis.

3.6.1 Interviews

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), interviews are key features of qualitative research and help to provide understanding of the social actors' experiences and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations. Most researchers normally select persons for interviews only if their experiences are central to the research problem in some way – especially due to their skills, expertise or wealth of knowledge that can answer the critical questions and satisfy the objectives of the research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For this reason, an interview guide was prepared based on the research questions with a number of questions critical to the study. The interview was conducted with the participants and notes were taken with their permission.

3.6.2 Document Analysis

According to Bowen (as cited in Triad, 2016), Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic. The scholar continues that analyzing documents incorporates coding content into themes similar to how focus group or interview transcripts are analyzed. O’Leary (2014) indicates that before an actual document analysis will take place, it is important for it to go through a detailed planning process in order to ensure reliable results. He further outlines an 8-step planning process that should take place as in the following:

1. Create a list of texts to explore (for instance, population, samples, respondents, participants).
2. Consider how texts will be accessed with attention to linguistic or cultural barriers.
3. Acknowledge and address biases.
4. Develop appropriate skills for research.
5. Consider strategies for ensuring credibility.
6. Know the data one is searching for.
7. Consider ethical issues (for instance, confidential documents).
8. Have a backup plan.

Apart from the above, Bowen (as cited in Triad, 2016), indicated that, document analysis is an efficient and effective way of gathering data because documents are manageable and practical resources. They are commonplace and come in a variety of forms, making them a very accessible and reliable source of data. Cresswell (2009), also shared that, document analysis saves time and expense of transcribing. Following from the assertions, documents like memoranda, policy documents, organizational newsletters and press releases were investigated.

3.6.3 Techniques for Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis and this according to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), involves synthesising the bulk information gathered from various sources into a logical description of what was set out to be investigated. Due to this, data was categorized in coherent units of information and was themed and coded. Also the interviews were later transcribed and the responses from the participants were analyzed and themed based on the most recurring issues.

3.6.4 Data Collection Procedure

From the onset, introductory letters were given to the participants to seek their permission before data collection commenced. The participants were then informed on the purpose of the study, after which the interview commenced.

3.7 Validity and Reliability of the Study

Creswell (2009) posits that, validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and it is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account. He therefore suggests eight (8) primary procedures/strategies that can be used to validate qualitative studies. They are triangulation of data sources, use member checking, use rich/thick description to convey findings, clarify biases, negative case analysis, spend prolonged time in the field, use peer review and debriefing, and use an external auditor to review the project. Creswell (2014) further indicates that reliability in qualitative research is very important. It means dependability or consistency and this is determined based on the approach as to whether it is consistent across different projects. Yin (2003), suggests

that qualitative researchers must always document the procedures of their case studies as well as the steps of procedure as possible. In this regard, data collection methods such as interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed before analysis. An interview guide was used to conduct face-to-face interview.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Fleming & Zegwaard (2018), indicated that at many educational institutions, to collect data from human participants for research purposes without ethical approval would place the researcher outside the institutions Staff Code of Conduct (often worded within the requirement of adherence to institutional regulations, which will include the Human Research Ethics regulation). They continued that most work-integrated learning research involves human participants; therefore, it is fundamentally important that human research ethics approval must be obtained. It is important that approval be gained before the commencement of data gathering from human participants because human research ethics committees cannot grant approval for research after the data collection has begun. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the cornerstone of ethical research is 'informed consent'. This they claim is a term that consists of two (2) important elements, with each requiring careful consideration, that is, 'informed' and 'consent'. In furtherance, they indicate that, participants must be fully informed of what will be asked of them, how the data will be used, and what (if any) consequences there could be. The participants must provide explicit, active, signed consent to taking part with the research, including understanding their rights to access to their information and the right to withdraw at any point. Creswell (2009), similarly emphasizes that, when conducting research, it is extremely important to protect research participants, acknowledge all sources, develop trust with the participants, promote the integrity of the research, guard against

misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organisations or institutions and also cope with new challenging problems. Based on that, the ethical considerations above were strictly adhered to, to avoid any form of mishap.

3.9 Summary

This chapter summarized the procedures and techniques that were adopted to solve the research problem. The approach used for the study was the descriptive research design under the qualitative research method, to help answer *why* and *how* questions, and to develop an in-depth analysis of the the topic under study. The purposive sampling method, precisely snowball sampling technique was employed to access the accessible population for the study. Informed consent was sought from the accessible population, which followed the gathering of primary and secondary data, under the qualitative data collection method, specifically interview and document analysis respectively. The study employed thematic analysis, that categorized data into coherent units of information, themed and coded. In addition, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed, with all protocols under ethical considerations painstakingly observed.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents analyzed data collected through interview, and discusses the findings as well. The chapter highlights the issues from the study's participants and documents analyzed for the purpose of this study. Three (3) Public Relations practitioners of the Ghana Health Service were interviewed and these included the head of the public relations department and two (2) other key practitioners. The analysis was done on the factors and sources of information that may be responsible for misinformation and disinformation of covid-19, the key roles of public relations practitioners in the Ghana Health Service in fighting misinformation and disinformation in a pandemic, and the communication processes and measures that were adopted by the health public relations practitioners to curb the level of fake news on covid-19 and mitigate the health crisis situation. The participants of the study will be referred to as PR1 for the head of public relations, PR2 for the second practitioner, and PR3 for the third practitioner.

4.1 Analysis and Discussion of factors and sources of information that may be responsible for misinformation and disinformation of covid-19.

4.1.1 Public Relations Channels and Processes of Communication

According to Taillard (2000), two (2) major goals of public relations when communicating, is to be understood, such that the communicated message will be decoded with the intended meaning by the recipient of the message, and secondly affect and influence the behaviours and beliefs of the target audience. Thus public relations employs the art of persuasive communication to

disseminate information to its publics in order to achieve those goals. Following from the above, Wilcox et al (2015) indicated that, the media is the conveyor of messages to the publics of various organizations. So it is important to choose a channel that is appropriate in order to communicate the messages. The scholars categorize channels of communication as public and private. Where public channels are those used by organizations to communicate to the external publics and the private channels are those used by organizations to communicate with its internal publics. The study sought to know the channels of communication the Ghana Health Service uses to disseminate information to its publics. It was found out that, the Ghana Health Service uses various channels such as traditional media, which are radio, television and prints, to reach out to its publics. There were other channels/ mediums like organizational newsletters, memos and press releases that are used to disseminate relevant information. In the submission of PR1;

For purposes of mass communication in order to reach out to the general public simultaneously, we use traditional media – that is community radios and national television channels to disseminate information. Sometimes we employ physical methods like deploying information vans to communities, so rural folks are not left out. Social media channels like Twitter and Facebook are fervently employed to disseminate information.

Apart from that, the health practitioners fervently use new media channels, which include social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to vastly engage the general public and follow trends with regard to health issues. The participants also confirmed the constant updates on the ministry's Website and blogs for publics who rely on them for authentic information. This according to PR2;

Apart from using radio and TV, the organization's website and social media handles are always updated since many people follow and seek authentic information from the ministry to make informed decisions on their health especially during the covid-19 pandemic.

4.1.2 Models of Public Relations

With regard to the channels of communication, Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four (4) models that organizations use to communicate with their publics. These are the Press Agency publicity model, Public Information model, Two-Way Asymmetric model and Two-Way Symmetric model. The study found that the traditional channels-television, radio, print and social media used by the Ghana Health Service fall within all the four (4) models developed by Grunig and Hunt but each model is used depending on the type of message. Predominantly, the Public Information model and Two-Way Symmetric model are used. PR3 explained by submitting that;

PR experts at the ministry, adopt Public Information model and partners with traditional national media houses to aid in getting evidence-based news to the public. This is without alterations and feedback. This is to maintain the information as it is, for the general public to get the message in its natural form. Apart from the electronic channels, Prints are also another way of circulating messages. Prints might not be fast as electronic channels but they sure serve their purpose of reaching people without access to electronic messages.

In addition to that, PR2 asserted that, the ministry is able to meet the expectations of the general public through effective dialoguing. According to the participant;

There is dialoguing between the press and the ministry. So there is a two-way communication - that is the use of interactive social media platforms and the ministry's websites, which mostly helps to respond to enquiries and meet the expectations of the general public.

PR3 also added to the above by clarifying how they are able to leverage on the communication mediums adopted, and the merits the Health Service derives with regard to building effective relationship with their stakeholders.

We were able to develop some form of relationship with the stakeholders. Thus the electronic mediums help in building effective relationship with the media houses and other stakeholders as they move along, and this helps in achieving success at the end of the day. Often, the PR obtains advice on the best of times to broadcast messages of relevance. These are some ways the PR leverages on the mediums they use in disseminating information (PR3).

4.1.3 Factors responsible for Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation

Many people, out of fear, panic and delays in obtaining authentic information on the global health crisis – coronavirus disease 2019 and in a bid to make informed decisions, resorted to various mediums to access information on the deadly virus. In view of this, people across the globe accessed both credible and fake news. This situation created confusion about what is truth or not truth about the disease. Unfortunately, some people took advantage of the situation and propagated fake news on vast social media platforms that downplayed the efforts of health experts, and tend to situate pressure on communication specialist to surmount the information gaps and defects. Azim et al (2020) in their study of fake news related to African Ebola indicated that, the adverse impact of Ebola epidemic was highest due to its multiple fake news origin sites, both online and offline propagation methods with well fabricated content and relatively low effort on containment. The situation is not different in Ghana with regard to covid-19. The study found out that, the health public relations practitioners were unable to control contents individuals circulated on social media platforms. According to PR2;

Many individuals and bloggers on social media share certain falsehood information without verifying them and they go viral on social media. There might be delays on the part of PR to counter such falsehood but the fake news phenomenon is a different and tough battle on its own.

The above submission is in unison with reports from ‘The Science of Fake news, Shorenstein Center: 2018’ (as cited in Azim et al, 2020), that the Internet has reduced many constraints on dissemination of news. This allows outlets that do not embody these norms to compete online with those that do, on a relatively more equal footing than was possible offline, and that has contributed to the abandonment of traditional news sources that had long enjoyed high levels of public trust and credibility. In addition, PR1 attributed the propagation of fake news to delays from the authentic source and social media by saying;

Unfortunately access to fact-based information from the right source, that is the World Health Organization before dissemination, delays. This is one out of the many factors responsible for the propagation of fake news. One factor that may be responsible for fake news is inappropriate use of channel especially if the channel is used without taking into consideration who the target audience is. Moreover, bloggers and individual social media users are not left out as they are the first to be mentioned as falsehood peddlers.

4.1.4 Public Relations and Systems of Crisis Detection

Unforeseen situations in their nature, do not forewarn victims before emerging. And when its possible emergence is undermined, organizations suffer dire consequences. When it comes to crisis management, public relations are at the fore because their communication efforts can either make or break through the crisis situation. This implies the need to have alert systems and contingency plans. The coronavirus disease 2019, is globally perceived as unprecedented crisis due to the failure of systems to detect the undesirable effects it will cause to humanity. Apart from that, there was failure to identify the spread of falsehood on the virus out of fear and panic from individuals globally. With regard to the propagation of fake news on the coronavirus disease, Azim et al (2020) express worry over the long-drawn impact that may cover most countries in the world with terrifying consequences. Hence the need for programmes and policies that will serve as an Early Warning Systems to be recommended by organs of governments responsible, in order to risk communicate strategically, during unforeseen crisis of this nature in the future. In other words, real-time contingency measures for effective risk communication must be prepared. This is in tandem with the assertions of Purvis and Busby (2004) that systems must be in place to provide timely and effective information, through identifying institutions that will allow individuals exposed to hazard, take action in order to avoid or reduce risks and prepare for effective response". The study found out that the public relations practitioners of the Ghana Health Service did not

actually have systems that pre-empted the propagation of fake news, and that posed challenges in managing the situation. The response from PR3 says it all. This is what the practitioner said;

Very challenging to say the least. The PR is always having one story or the other to counter relating to the pandemic. It probably wouldn't have been the situation if we foresaw it coming. And I think it boils down to not having a cover up plan. And in addition to this overwhelming task, we have an under staffing situation of highly qualified PR practitioners. So sometimes fore knowledge on what is happening even becomes an issue.

Following from the above submission, it is clear that having systems in place can have a positive impact on organizations' crisis plans. Garcia and Fearnley (2012), opine that, even though the magnitude of designing task, implementing, and sustaining Early Warning Systems in organizations is enormous, it is a very effective policy that must be fundamental to publics and institutions because, it ensures timely alerts and quick response to unpleasant situations. And that will contribute to the success of public relations in crisis management.

4.2 Analysis and Discussion of the Key Roles of Public Relations in the Ghana Health Service in the fight against fake news in a pandemic.

4.2.1 Public Relations as a Management Function.

The study found out that, public relations is a separate unit at top management, and reports directly to the Director General of the Ghana Health Service. Also, according to the study, even though public relations is positioned at management level, it is muted when it comes to policy formulation or decision making processes. This assertion was confirmed by PR1. According to the participant;

When it comes to the position of public relations in the Ghana Health Service, I can tell you that we are at top management. I am saying so, because I always sit in management meetings and even coordinate the activities of the meeting. The only issue is that I don't have a voice when it comes to critical decision-making, even though I often get the opportunity to make suggestions. And I believe you understand what it means to make suggestions.

This response is consistent with the assertions of Broom et al (2009) that it is not in all instances that public relations officers will enjoy top management position. This implies public relations means and does different things depending on where the practitioner finds him/ herself such that they could play technician roles. The findings thus confirm a similar situation in the Ghana Health Service, where public relations is allowed into all management meetings but their inputs are not highly-weighted. Information accessed through interviews conducted with participants and documents analyzed from the public relations unit at the Ghana Health Service indicated that, public relations is a standalone unit that deals directly with a single head, that is the Director General. Therefore, the unit is segregated from the other Directorates. Thus, the head of Public Relations unit reports directly to the Director General, who reports to the Ghana Health Council under the Ministry of Health. As established earlier, the public relations unit is an integral part of top management. The study also revealed that the head of public relations always participates in all meetings and acts as the master of ceremony (MC) for the meetings. However, the public relations' voice is always muted during critical decision making. In some cases, the head of public

relations is given the opportunity to suggest but not to make inputs that may necessarily effect the needed change. In addition to the above, the study established that the public relations unit monitors traditional media – radio and television, with the rationale to ascertain information about health issues in the country and by so doing, counter any fake news that comes to light with credible information.

4.2.2 Public Relations and the Educational Levels of Practitioners

Sietel (2007), argues that having a good educational background in Communication or Public Relations, guarantees excellent performance in practicing Public Relations. Center, Jackson et al (2008) opine that, the competence of Public Relations practitioners is measured by management; that is, if the practitioner knows his or her work well, and is also respected and seen by management as an expert in his or her field. The practitioners can thus earn respect from their superiors if they are highly educated and exhibit absolute competence in line of duty. In furtherance to the above, a question was posed to one of the participants to ascertain the relevance of attaining a high level of education in public relations. The participant agreed with the fact that, a higher educational background is essential to understanding issues discussed at management meetings and to some extent, it is expected of the public relations practitioner to contribute and serve as an advisory tool and a consultant during such important and critical meetings. Moreover, one imperative thing worth noting is that, the public relations practitioner is expected to earn a place in top management by virtue of experience, academic and professional qualifications. The data confirmed that the head of public relations has the requisite qualification and experience in line with the postulations of Heath (2010) that the public relations practitioner must exhibit a high sense of wisdom and intelligence which can be partly gained through education. Again, public relations practitioners

must have good educational background if they want to progress rapidly in their field just like in other cases.

4.2.3 Daily Duties of Public Relations Practitioners

SeiteI (2007) makes a case that several duties may emerge for an individual practitioner in the organization. Some of which are writing, media relation, planning, publicity, community relations, organizing special events, website designs, attending meeting and many others. The study found that the Ghana Health Service practitioners play all these roles to a large extent from time to time. However the most dominant duties include; organizing meetings for top management, writing speeches, organizing and planning special events, daily media monitoring, public opinion evaluation and also responding to media enquiries, among others. PR3 had this to say;

The PR practitioners' every day role, place them in a position to protect the image of the organization. They are communicators and managers of information internally and externally. Through public relations, the general public is aware of what is happening around them apart from journalists reporting the news. Public relations engage structures to effectively convey messages in an organized manner.

The assertion above is an indication that, public relations is the lifeline of every organization because of the roles they play daily. This implies that, a public relations practitioner must have the needed skills and the abilities required to carry out his/her daily duties, and communicate effectively with persuasive skills.

4.2.4 Key Roles of Public Relations in the Fight against Fake News

Broom et al (2009) argue that, over time, public relations practitioners always adopt patterns of behaviours to deal with recurring situations in their work and to accommodate the expectations of

others about what they should do in their jobs. The scholars believe that four (4) major roles describe much of public relations practice. However, the scholars think that at one time or the other practitioners may play all the four roles to varying degrees even though a dominant role could emerge as they go about their day-to-day activities. These four (4) roles are: Expert Prescriber, Communication Technician, Problem-Solving Facilitator and Communication Facilitator.

The study found out that these roles are played in the Ghana Health Service, depending on the kinds of situations the organization finds itself in and what it has to deal with at a given time. As asserted by Broom et al, the dominant role that emerged during the pandemic was an Expert role because the situation at hand is one that needed expert advice to deal with. PR3 had this to say in that regard,

There are various ranks and depending on the proficiency of the PR practitioner, he/ she may be at a top position with management or not, but one fundamental and important thing is that, PR plays an essential role in every organization and pertaining to their roles in the health sector, they are solely in charge of communicating the ministry's policies and programmes to the general public. And they do it with a fore knowledge of who they are communicating to, by devising various means. This cannot be possible if PR is not perceived as a key role player.

PR1 agreed with PR3 by indicating that, public relations is very essential when it comes to management decision-making because without public relations, communication cannot be effective. According to PR1, public relations practitioners need to be present at top management deliberations since it is the tool used to reach the general public. Broom et al (2009) believe that, issues management is an integral part of public relations, thus public relations practitioners must have the expertise to deal with such issues before they degenerate into crisis. The scholars maintain that two (2) points capture the essence of issues management. These are, Early Identification of issues with potential impact on the organization and a strategic response designed to mitigate their consequences. Coombs (2007) explains that, crisis management is a critical organizational

function because if crises are not well managed, they can result in serious harm to stakeholders, losses for an organization, or end its very existence. Thus, public relations practitioners are supposed to be an integral part of crisis management teams. The study discovered that, the Ghana Health Service has been hit by issues but not as severe as currently happening with regard to the covid-19 pandemic and issues of myths and fake news circulating around the deadly virus. This has become another crisis on its own that the health public relations must manage effectively. The coronavirus disease is an unprecedented global health crisis that has had immeasurable consequences on the economic and social well-being of nations worldwide. Unfortunately, apart from the fight against the pandemic, the wide spread of false information has adversely affected the efforts of health practitioners to keep the infectious disease under control. Ghana was not left out of the need to fight fake news, hence burdening the health public relations practitioners with additional tasks to perform. Fake news according to Desai et al (2021), are those news stories that are false: the story itself is fabricated, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes. Where these stories sometimes may be propaganda that is intentionally designed to mislead the reader, or may be designed as a “clickbait” written for economic incentives (the writer profits on the number of people who click on the story). This is the situation the health public relations practitioners were confronted with and had to play specific and numerous roles to curb it. This according to the participants, was a very daunting task. In the participant’s assertions;

It has been a very daunting task and it still is, but the PR is relentless in its efforts to be persistent in creating awareness on the virus until it is over. The PR unfortunately has not been able to be ahead of news of falsehood regarding the coronavirus disease, and this is because the PR does not have control over what individuals do in terms of messages they share and circulate on social media. What the PR is able to do which is better than never is, always following trends on the internet and get a grip of what is being discussed on the open that many people tend to believe without verifying. The PR now has to counter the trending fake news with scientific and evidence-based information from the World Health Organization (WHO) on the websites and other media portals that will be shared to all other networks for mass communication. This even means that the PR is always on the

edge, conducting research to keep abreast with trends on the myths circulating on the pandemic (PR1).

The second and third participants also had this to say respectively;

Apart from the fight on social media, the ministry and all health facilities in partnership with media houses have come together to communicate a common and consistent message on the virus to the general public through posters and Ads on televisions and radios. Major stakeholders were involved, by ensuring the general public adhere to the laid down protocols. This is more like a tactics to persistently raise awareness on the deadly virus to counter the myths circulating on the virus since many people do not believe it is real (PR2).

The PR has been able to come up with messages persistently to convince the general public on the reality of the situation on ground. These are Ads that are consistently aired on both radio and television media outlets. At community level, one major move by the ministry is deploying public health nurses to rural communities to educate folks on the virus, how real it is and what they can do to prevent contracting it. The Health Promotion Directorate – a division responsible for the wellbeing of the general public, solely in charge of all good health promotional activities and sensitizing the general public on how to prevent deadly diseases. The division empowered locals in communities to live happier lives by living well. This initiative left many community members well-informed and free of doubts with regard to the coronavirus disease (PR3).

It can be said from the above statements that, even though the fake news crisis went ahead of the ministry, the health public relations practitioners have been proactive in their communication roles since they have always been at the forefront of engaging in communication, on issues that bother on the health of the nation.

4.3 Communication processes and measures adopted by PR practitioners in the Ghana Health Service to curb the level of misinformation and disinformation on covid19 and mitigate the health crisis situation.

4.3.1 Public Relations and its Organization

According to Heath and Coombs (2006), public relations practitioners must be part of every policy formulation in organizations; and must also see to the implementation of such policies. The scholars argue that organizations that ignore this important rule, risk creating crises for themselves and when such incidents occur, public relations is tasked to turn things around. The findings

confirmed the assertions of the scholars with the participants affirming that, for an organization to be successful, it needs public relations to help implement its policies and programmes, and also communicate it effectively to the general public. In the words of PR1;

As a PR practitioner, I must say we manage communication issues within the organization and outside the organization. That is communication to the general public with the right mediums. One other role we play is serving as an advisory tool by providing management with the relevant information pertaining to how to package and present information, and how the public may react to the new policies and programmes to be implemented. This is a health ministry and taking crucial decisions that will involve the wellbeing of the people must not be taken for granted. Thus the views of PR is sought before arriving at the best of decisions, before it goes out to the general public.

The above is an indication that, public relations is an integral and essential part of an organization.

4.3.2 Public Relations and the Need for Research

Newsom et al (2012) argue that research is a very important component of public relations practice. The scholars believe that systematic research helps organizations in many ways such as: Identification of publics, media and trend analysis, issues monitoring and provision of essential data for policy directions of organizations. Lattimore et al (2004), also point out that management always demand hard facts, not intuition or guess work, therefore public relations practitioners must be able to demonstrate convincingly their ability to add value in producing a product or service. This is not any different from the study's findings, as PR3 confirmed the above by indicating that, before a public relations practitioner reaches out to the publics, it is implied that the practitioner has fore knowledge of who he/she is communicating to, and devising various means that will enable effective communication.

4.3.3 Public Relations Strategic Communication to Curb Crisis - Fake News

In every crisis situation, careful thoughts need to be given to pursue prescribed measures and strategies in order to avoid failures that might aggravate the crisis situation. Strategies in communication ensure that every significant information is disseminated to the right audience, both internally and externally. In a bid to understand the measures and strategies used to manage the fake news menace, a question was posed in that regard to the participant and this is what PR1 had to say;

With regard to the health discipline, the public relations practitioners engage in what is termed Risk Communication. Due to how delicate certain issues are, like the covid-19 pandemic, public relations professionals or communication experts are tasked to draft their messages and deliver them with urgency, using the right communication tools. Understanding what to communicate, who is being communicated to, and how to convey the message is very paramount. Thus, understanding and knowing how to communicate the message is a good strategy that contributes to the success of public relations.

From the submission above, it is evident that employing effective strategy in crisis communication enables efficiency in quick conveyance of relevant information through appropriate communication mediums like television and radio broadcast for mass communication, and electronic mediums like websites, blogs and social media. The key role of strategic communication during crisis is to stabilize and protect the image and reputation of the organization by inspiring confidence in the general public, earning their trust and engaging all relevant stakeholders. That will require a clear and consistent message. Tench, and Yeomans (2009) emphasize that Public Relations practitioners must demonstrate their value to the employing organizations – whether it is reputation management or relationship building that they are offering. The study found out that the public relations practitioners of the Ghana Health Service demonstrated that by employing measures and strategies that stabilized and protected the image of the ministry. According to the participants, they are the face of the organization and must discharge their duties diligently through public relations experts. This is what PR2 has to say to that effect;

Since public relations practitioners communicate on behalf of the organization, they communicate strategically through media relations. For example, 'Meet The Press', press releases that will fast circulate and get to the public domain. They also use the corporate's social media handles and spaces frequently to reach the masses at once. For others who may not be reached through the internet, especially folks in the rural areas, traditional media is engaged to strategically use native language that the community is conversant with.

According to Falkheimer and Heide (2010), the availability of new media widens the communication options organizations have when communicating during a crisis. As part of strategies practitioners may have at their disposal to reach target audience from various sectors, Stephens and Malone (2010), indicated that the options available for communicating crisis have expanded considerably. According to the scholars, organizational websites offer a highly accessible resource that provides a variety of stakeholders with crisis information and whether using weblogs, Twitter, podcasts, YouTube, and email messages, or simply keeping a website, it must be up to date since there are many new media options available. The study revealed that, the practitioners of the Ghana Health Service strategically engaged electronic communication channels to fight the fake news crisis in order to curb the spread of the deadly coronavirus disease.

In the words of PR1 and PR2;

The health PR, for purposes of mass communication in order to reach out to the general public simultaneously, uses traditional media – that is community radios and national television channels to disseminate information. Social media channels like Twitter and Facebook are fervently employed in dissemination of information (PR1).

Apart from using radio and TV, the organization's website and social media handles are always updated as many people follow and seek authentic information from the ministry to make informed decisions on their health especially during the covid-19 pandemic (PR2).

According to Stephens and Malone (2010), blogs are created and authored by private individuals and increasingly by organizations. While organizations can use new media such as blogs to help them create dialogue with their stakeholders, it is important to also consider that the stakeholders themselves can use blogs to connect with other stakeholders. This is highly relevant during a crisis

where stakeholders might feel victimized and are looking for others who share their views. When crisis victims use social networking sites to find others, they are not limited by geography. Stakeholders can meet virtually, share stories, form coalitions, share the latest information, and even seek collective legal action. This is why it is imperative for organizations to employ this measure strategically to allay the fears of their audience. The scholars again asserted that, one key component found in newer media is its capacity to facilitate bi-directional communication, or dialogue. In addition, Paul (as cited in Stephens and Malone 2010), indicated that instead of static source, people opt for World Wide Web (WWW) as a preferred source of information during a crisis due to its interactive nature. Findings from the study affirmed the assertions of the scholars. According to the practitioners;

There is dialoguing between the press and the ministry. So there is a two-way communication which mostly helps to satisfy the expectations of the general public. We were able to engage the public during face to face meetings, that is 'Meet The Press' organized with the help the media. The interaction enables feedback from stakeholders which the ministry incorporate in its decision making plans and policy modification. Thus, such engagements always pave a way for the ministry to work for the people and ensure their general wellbeing (PR1).

We were able to develop some form of relationship with the stakeholders. Thus the electronic mediums help in building effective relationship with the media houses and other stakeholders as they move along, and this helps in achieving success at the end of the day (PR2).

From the above, the health public relations practitioners' strategies are in conformity with French Sociologist Von Bruno Latour's, Actor-Network theory. Which explains the concept of how material-semiotic networks come together to act as a whole such that, humans actors manipulate non-human actors to speak and translate contexts on their behalf and get them into their positions. The Actor-Network theory is a social concept that treats all actors - people, objects and organizations in networks as equals with common understanding and outcomes, through interactions and feedbacks. This clearly defines how the practitioners leverage on the non-human actors to understand the reactions and feedbacks from the general public.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 INTRODUCTION

The study set out generally to investigate the key roles of public relations practitioners in the Ghana Health Service, on strategies employed to fight the propagation of fake news in a pandemic era. The objectives of the study were to find out the factors and sources of information that may be responsible for this propagation, and the communication processes and measures adopted by the Ghana health Service practitioners to curb it. This chapter therefore presents a summary of the research findings, makes conclusions, outlines the limitations of the study and makes recommendations.

5.1 Summary of Findings

In summary, the in-depth interviews conducted with the three (3) public relations practitioners revealed that, the activities of public relations are key to the success of every organization, especially when it comes to communication but public relations is not highly recognized as other directorates at top management level. Even though ‘public relations’ plays an essential role of protecting the image and reputation of its employing organization, it is not given the mandate to be part of management’s decision-making processes but present at such top meetings for the purposes of understanding the deliberations, in order to communicate persuasively and effectively. The study thus revealed the relevance of public relations to be at the fore with persuasive communication to risk communicate during crisis situations to mitigate its effects. The issue of fake news was one that needed to be tackled from source. Thus the need for the health public

relations to strategize through the mediums that were used by social media users to circulate the fake news, and counter it with credible information from the World Health Organization. Following from that, the study investigated the channels and processes of communication available to the public relations practitioners to curb the wide spread of fake news. It was revealed that, the practitioners adopted traditional media for mass communication - that is television and radio to disseminate information to its publics. This is purposely to reach out to various remote areas to get authentic and evidence-based information to local indigenes and alleviate doubts and fears, as a result of fake news about the pandemic. The practitioners constantly updated the Ministry's websites and blogs to keep their followers abreast with information they sought. Their presence on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram was glaring, as the health public relations practitioners were constantly delivering reliable contents about the virus. As part of their roles, it was required of the public relations practitioners to conduct a research after identifying the problem and devising measures to solve the problem. In addition to that, some measures employed by the practitioners was to monitor various media platforms including social and traditional, to be well informed of the negative messages that were trending on the disease. The study found out that, both dialogic and monologic strategies were used to communicate with the publics and they proved effective. As part of measures and strategies to curb the fake news menace, the Ministry inaugurated a new division known as 'Health Promotion Directorate', which was in charge of the wellbeing of the general public by empowering, sensitizing and engaging local community members physically in good health promotional activities on how to prevent deadly diseases. According to the findings, that initiative was very strategic and successful because, many people in the rural communities were positively influenced and educated amply on the deadly virus and how to keep safe in such turbulent times.

Per the findings, the public relations practitioners encountered challenges of constantly following new developments and drafted suitable messages that altered negative perceptions of the publics, and disseminating them through both traditional and social media platforms. This move by the practitioners is consistent with the Actor-Network Theory which explains the concept of human actors that manipulate non-human actors to act on their behalf, and a medium through which a common platform is created for consensus and mutual understanding. The findings also highlighted how difficult it was to control contents individual social media users posted on various platforms and influenced the perceptions of the masses negatively, which to some extent lead to stigmatization of patients who had fully recovered from the deadly virus. It was a daunting task for the practitioners. Thus according to the findings, the situation would have been brought to rest on time only if systems were in place to detect the crisis situation before it unfolds. This revelation is in line with the Early Warning Systems theory which admonishes that, organs of governments responsible, must recommend real-time contingency measures that will effectively risk communicate during crisis situations, be prepared in advance.

5.2 Conclusions

In conclusion, the participants of the study submitted that, fears and gaps or delays in the flow of information were to blame for the menace of fake news. The issue of fake news propagation posed a fraught situation to the health public relations practitioners such that the practitioners were heavy-laden with drafting credible messages from time to time, in order to counter fake news on various media platforms. To the extreme, every media platform including traditional media, websites and blogs, print broadcast and social media, had to be employed by the public relations practitioners to engage its publics. This required the public relations to channel their strategies

through the very platforms that had fake news circulating on them, to positively affect and influence the behaviours and beliefs in that regard. Again, the health public relations practitioners, had to leverage on their relationship with the media to plan and organize press meetings under pressure. Irrespective of the medium used by the practitioners, they effectively ensured a two-way communication since it enabled feedbacks that allowed management to modify its decisions and strategies. This implies that, the presence of the health public relations on social media has been very effective in countering fake news that run rife on various social media platforms, even though they faced various challenges.

Furthermore, the community outreach strategy like the Health Promotional Programme adopted by the Ministry has gone a long way to improve the health-public relationship, and has also promoted constant interaction that will enable trust and credence to health public relations information.

And finally, it was evident that the Ministry excelled in its pandemic management plans as a result of the communication efforts the public relations practitioners exerted in line of duty. This simply means that public relations is the life line of every organization and must be given the needed recognition, power and resources for their communication efforts in every situation.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of the study was the long and cumbersome procedures a researcher had to undergo in obtaining ethical clearance from a government institution. And also the excessively long awaiting time involved in waiting for authorization to collect data, caused an unusual delay in completing the research on time. Another difficulty posed was access to the head of public relations unit since they were always burdened with various activities with regard to organizing

events and facilitating them – in a bid to manage the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, the practitioners were uncomfortable with voice recording method. Hence, declined to be recorded. However, the quality of data was not affected.

5.4 Recommendations

Fake news has been around for many years but with the explosion of internet and social media, it has heightened and posing threats to society. The situation is not different in Ghana with regard to the new coronavirus pandemic. The availability of sparing information has given rise to untruth stories about the virus, and the most effective way to counter and mitigate the effects of fake news, is empowering communication experts – public relations practitioners. It is strongly recommended that, government agencies and institutions must promote and support public relations campaigns against fake news, as part of their corporate social responsibilities in their various communities. Also, it is recommended that crisis detection systems and policies like Early Warning Systems must be prepared ahead of time in order alleviate the many frustrations and challenges practitioners encounter during risk communication. And finally, public and private institutions must inject financial and technological resources into their operations to sanitize the space of fake news.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Studies

The study focused on the key roles public relations played in ameliorating the dangers and negative effects of propagating fake news in a pandemic era, precisely the unprecedented covid-19 pandemic. It will therefore be prudent if future researchers can extensively explore further into understanding the key strategies and measures that worked for the public relations, and

improvements made with new methods adopted to manage crisis situations. And finally, the study recommends that future studies should focus more on systems that may have been implemented specifically for public relations experts to detect crisis ahead of time.

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APPENDIX 1
INTERVIEW GUIDE

TOPIC: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS IN A PANDEMIC ERA: A CASE STUDY OF GHANA HEALTH SERVICE.

This study is an academic exercise that seeks to explore and understand Public Relations practices in the Ghana Health Service and how information is disseminated, and finally how fake news is managed during a pandemic. I will be very grateful if you could help me conduct the interview to obtain the needed information for the study. I assure you of my utmost confidentiality because the data to be collected is solely for academic purposes.

Section A: Key Roles of Public Relations

1. Do you consider Public Relations to be at top management position or not?
2. What are the roles that you play as a Health Public Relations practitioner?

Section B: PR Communication Strategies and Channels

3. What communication strategies do you use to communicate with your publics?
4. What communication channels are available at your department that you use to communicate with and to your publics and how effective are these channels?
5. How does your outfit effectively leverage on communication mediums to engage your publics?

Section C: Adopted Measures and Strategies to fight Fakes News

6. How has the Public Relations department in the Ghana Health Service been able to deal with fake news circulating on the deadly coronavirus 2019?

7. What factors will you say are responsible for fake news circulating about the Covid-19 pandemic?
8. Which communication processes and measures have been adopted to curb fake news?
9. What key roles has the Public Relations department of the Ghana Health Service played in the fight against misinformation and disinformation on covid-19?
10. What new strategies and communication processes will you adopt to keep rumours on the new constraint on covid-19 under control?
11. What are some challenges you encounter as a practitioner in your attempt to deal with disinformation/ fake news?
12. How are these challenges, if any, affecting your ability to fight disinformation of the pandemic?

Section D: PR and Way Forward

13. Would you say you are satisfied with the role your department has played in the fight to end fake news regarding covid-19? Why or why not?
14. What tools would you need to play your role more effectively in the fight against disinformation?
15. What suggestion can you give for other practitioners who are also dealing with fake news in this pandemic era?

THANK YOU.