

Media coverage of COVID-19 vaccines: sources of information, and verification practices of journalists in Ghana

ABSTRACT

Background:

Research on vaccines confirms the crucial role media play in framing discourses and mobilizing public support for successful immunization campaigns. What journalists cover on vaccination issues and their diligence in producing stories can influence attitudes to and uptake of vaccines. This paper contributes to emerging discussions on the role of the media in pandemics and in vaccination programs by interrogating the information seeking and verification practices of journalists reporting on COVID-19 vaccines in Ghana.

Methods:

A cross-sectional online survey was conducted among journalists from June to July 2021 through self-administered questionnaires by means of Google forms. The opinions of 300 respondents, randomly drawn from members of the Ghana Journalists' Association, were solicited and a response rate of 73% obtained.

Results:

Majority of journalists surveyed relied on official health sources for their information on COVID-19 vaccines (61.5%) and were confident the benefits of vaccines outweigh the risks (70%). While journalists relied on a variety of expert sources, social media platforms served as important sources of information also, with respondents stating a preference for Facebook (48.3%), and WhatsApp (44%). Journalists stated they were guided by sound practices such as source credibility and relevance, but betrayed weaknesses in their verification practices with a third of them admitting to sharing unsolicited information from social media.

Conclusions:

Journalists in Ghana generally display a positive attitude towards COVID-19 vaccines and regularly search for information from official sources to inform their work, thus making them vital allies in overcoming vaccine hesitancy. Laxity in verification practices, however, makes them inadvertent agents of misinformation.