



Health Media in Algeria:

Algerian Satellite Channels Coverage During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

This study seeks to delineate the concept of health media, notably absent from our professional and academic discourses, elucidating its characteristics, objectives, and contemporary approaches to its implementation. It subsequently examines the response of Algerian satellite television channels in this arena, contextualized by the nascent media engagement with health phenomena in Algeria amid the global and local proliferation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings indicate that the Algerian audiovisual media, encompassing both public and private sectors, lacks cogent strategies for managing health crises, attributable to its prior disregard for health phenomena and its alignment with overarching policy responses to crises.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Crisis; Health Media; Media Coverage; Strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

Media experts argue that the health dimension of media is ensnared in a quandary due to its failure to actualize the theoretical concept that necessitates its role in guiding the public to safeguard their health. This media should furnish the public with comprehensive and precise information concerning diseases, healthful dietary and environmental practices, and requisite behaviors for addressing emergent situations to avert crises. Furthermore, it should provide support during unforeseen crises. Observations during the COVID-19 crisis reveal a deficiency in preemptive media support, followed by reactive crisis management aimed at curtailing the virus and mitigating its spread swiftly.

An examination of the Algerian media landscape, with a specific focus on television, reveals a pronounced neglect of the health phenomenon concerning its status, associated issues, and its potential implications for human beings and their socio-economic and environmental milieu. Notably, private satellite channels prioritize entertainment over informative and educational content, a choice constrained by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that journalists in the audiovisual sector face. This leads them to focus on social events and sometimes delve into aspects that may tarnish the reputation of societal traditions; this occurs within a media experiment seldom replicated amid the contemporary priorities of global media, which are increasingly oriented towards health, environmental, and climatic issues.

Under these circumstances, the notion of health media in Algeria remains largely theoretical and scarcely referenced in practical media applications. This paper aims to clarify the concept of health media and assess how well Algerian satellite channels, namely "Echorouk TV," "Ennahar," and "Algerie 3," have embraced this concept during the COVID-19 crisis. Their efforts in news coverage of the pandemic and promotion of health awareness through their programming are scrutinized. This leads us to pose the question: How did Algerian satellite channels manage the COVID-19 pandemic within the framework of health media?

This research employs descriptive and analytical methodologies to explore both global and national experiences in pandemic coverage, aiming to understand the strategies and techniques deployed to manage the crisis and elevate public health awareness. Using scientific observation as a tool to gather data on how the three Algerian satellite channels addressed the COVID-19 pandemic, and drawing from relevant scientific and media literature, the study outlines a framework that includes:

- Elucidating the concept of health media
- Defining the objectives of health media to ensure community health security
- Exploring global trends in health media regarding pandemic crisis management
- Documenting the Algerian experience in health media through its pandemic response

II. Definition of Health Media

The term "health media" emerged in the late 1990s, encapsulating a sophisticated intersection of organized, strategic activities. These activities blend media operations, educational efforts, and communicative initiatives with the objective of influencing the

attitudes and practices of the targeted audience (Al-Mushaqba, 2012, p. 143).

Health is defined by Perkins as "a state of relative equilibrium in bodily functions, resulting from the body's adaptation to detrimental environmental factors through a proactive preservation process" (Al-Jabali, 2006, p. 3). The World Health Organization expands this definition, describing health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. It underscores the interlinkages among physical, mental, and social health as fundamental to enabling productive individuals who contribute to society and lead fulfilling lives" (Al-Jabali, p. 3).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define health communication as "the study and utilization of communication strategies to inform and influence decisions that enhance health outcomes at both individual and community levels" (CDC, 2020).

Renata Schiavo offers a comprehensive perspective on health media, characterizing it as "a multidisciplinary approach that strives to reach diverse audiences and share pertinent health information. Its goal is to affect not only individuals and communities but also health practitioners, special interest groups, policymakers, and the broader public to endorse, implement, or sustain health-enhancing behaviors, practices, or policies" (Schiavo, 2007, p. 7). This definition asserts that health media is not restricted to any specific demographic nor solely to informational dissemination; it seeks to influence all stakeholders, including health professionals, and to impact health-related practices and policies.

Mohamed Abu Samra, in his book "Medical and Health Media," defines it as "a specialized type of media that focuses on disseminating news, information, ideas, and facts about both immediate and chronic medical, nursing, and health issues faced by the community. Its purpose extends beyond informing—it guides individuals through advice and directives, distinct from mere commercial advertising, aiming instead to foster health literacy and awareness" (Abu Samra, 2010, p. 30).

Health media covers a vast array of topics, from pediatric to public health concerns, encompassing family health, school health, nutritional health, environmental health, occupational health, patient care, infectious disease control, care for the disabled, health administration, planning, research, and public health services. It also addresses educational mental health, sexual health, and veterinary health (Al-Mushaqba, p. 3).

The analysis of health media's role reveals that current media engagements with health do not adequately reflect its vital significance in people's lives. As the lifeblood of human civilization, health should be prominently featured in media programming and content. The recent COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the global media's urgent mobilization to report on its spread and the ensuing impacts across various sectors—economic, social, political, and sporting—thereby illustrating a significant gap in proactive health media preparedness for such crises.

Thus, the value of health media transcends mere reportage of medical breakthroughs or advancements in surgical technologies. It embodies a continuous commitment to cultivating health awareness and culture, promoting health education linked to proper dietary choices, environmental stewardship, and engagement in physically beneficial activities, while eschewing harmful behaviors that adversely affect

individuals' physical and mental well-being (Musa, 2020, p. 6).

III. Objectives of Health Media

Experts in the media field believe that the process of educating the public with health information aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Transforming Societal Values and Perceptions

Effective health media strategically influences societal values concerning health and disease, promoting a contemporary understanding of health. This approach encourages individuals to assume responsibility for actively participating in health-related activities. Such activities include maintaining a nutritious diet, ensuring healthy living conditions, and providing comprehensive care in maternal and child health sectors (Freihat et al., 2001, p. 280).

2. Reforming Undesirable Habits and Behaviors

The objective of health media extends to cultivating healthy habits among individuals and discouraging detrimental ones. It underscores the significance of the efforts made by health authorities and their institutions to elevate the health and social standards of the populace. By elucidating the pivotal roles these institutions—such as centers for maternity and childhood, blood donation facilities, and fitness centers—play, health media facilitates the adoption of new, beneficial behaviors that enhance the welfare of society and the state (Freihat et al., p. 280).

3. Promoting Universal Health Values

This aspect involves positioning health as a valued goal for citizens, motivated by an intrinsic and well-informed desire to achieve optimal health outcomes. Through education that fosters an accurate scientific perspective, individuals become capable of analyzing health phenomena, understanding the etiology of diseases, and their consequences, thereby fostering preventive measures and proactive health maintenance. This objective necessitates collaboration among governmental and non-governmental health organizations to realize these health goals.

4. Empowering Citizens to Support and Enhance Health Facilities

Achievement in this area relies on individuals' comprehension and appreciation of the aims of health institutions, which exert substantial efforts and allocate resources for public health. Highlighting the innovative and proactive endeavors of personnel and institutions within the health sector encourages public engagement, trust, and support, which are essential for the success and enhancement of health services (Freihat et al., p. 281).

IV. Trends in Global Health Media's Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

Media treatment is defined as "the approach adopted by newspapers and other media platforms in addressing an issue, event, topic, or idea, guided by a specific editorial policy dictated by the organization's policy and ownership. This treatment primarily focuses on the organization's strategy in managing information and data, emphasizing how ideas and issues are presented, which aspects are highlighted, and which are overlooked" (Amer, 2010, p. 29). In the context of a crisis—an unexpected situation leading to new conditions and generating undesirable outcomes within a short timeframe that necessitates specific decisions for resolution—the primary role of the media is to engage in crisis management. This involves providing extensive media coverage that aims to foster public awareness, thereby aiding in the containment and resolution of the crisis.

Observers analyzing how various global media outlets have responded to the pandemic from its initial detection and the first casualties through its proliferation to over 200 countries and resulting in over 15 million deaths, as estimated by the World Health Organization for the years 2020 and 2021, will note the variation in media approaches. These approaches can be categorized into three distinct styles as identified by Marwa Al-Asadi in media crisis engagement: sensationalist treatment, incomplete treatment, and comprehensive treatment.

1. Sensational Media Treatment

This method of media coverage thrives on sensationalism and ends abruptly when the crisis resolves. It prioritizes the rapid dissemination of information, often at the expense of accuracy and objectivity, leading to a distortion of facts and potentially deceiving the public. Typically, such media practices align with political directives or the commercial imperatives that dominate the media landscape, overshadowing educational and informative functions of the media. (Al-Asadi, 2020) Numerous traditional and digital media platforms have succumbed to sensationalism, stoking public fear with hyperbolic news that exacerbates crises and contributes to psychological disorders as dangerous as Covid itself. These media outlets frequently disregard professional ethics, compromising the principles of responsibility essential for maintaining public safety and security. (Al-Tamimi, 2020)

It is critical to note the role of populist rhetoric from some political leaders in influencing media behavior, particularly in accusing foreign entities of conspiring against their nations to undermine health security for significant economic interests. Former U.S. President Donald Trump, for instance, utilized this approach by accusing China of engineering and disseminating the coronavirus to destabilize the American economy. For example, the coverage by Fox News in the United States was markedly politicized, influenced by President Trump's narratives and policies, and tended to attack critics of these policies, thereby undermining the potential for effective health media coverage free from narrow political and economic agendas.

2. Incomplete Media Treatment

This approach stands in contrast to its predecessor, aiming to minimize rather than exaggerate the crisis. It involves reducing the dissemination of crucial information to the public and downplaying the severity of the pandemic, which results in misinformation and deception. The World Health Organization has questioned the accuracy of reported infection and death figures worldwide, suggesting that many countries have underreported COVID-19 death tolls, with only 5.4 million deaths officially recorded by May 2022. (BBC News Arabic, 2022) In the Arab media landscape, certain Egyptian satellite channels have exemplified this approach during the coronavirus pandemic by marginalizing specialists capable of providing essential preventive medical and health information, thus failing to enhance viewers' awareness of the pandemic's risks and preventive measures. (Al-Tamimi, 2020)

3. Comprehensive Media Treatment

This treatment adopts a meticulous consideration of all crisis aspects—causation, context, developments, statistics, responses, and future outlook—characterized by its holistic, accurate, and objective nature. This method adheres to a strategy that neither ignores the ongoing or anticipated crisis nor indulges in fearmongering about "inevitable

death." Some media organizations worldwide have upheld the principles of social responsibility and adhered to journalistic ethics, avoiding the allure of sensationalism while committing to precision and impartiality. Media institutions with established professional standards, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), exemplify this approach. The BBC's Director of News emphasized the essential role of public media during health emergencies, focusing on delivering accurate and trustworthy news. (Al-Tamimi, 2020)

Al Arabia's coverage as well treated the coronavirus as a global pandemic, focusing on hotspots worldwide rather than primarily within the channel's host country, unlike Fox News, which predominantly framed the virus as an American crisis. (Musa, 2020) Therefore, Al Arabia's treatment of the pandemic as a global educational initiative, not a locally fixated narrative, predominantly utilized official data and statistics in its broadcasts, situating its coverage firmly within the context of crisis media. This portrayal of comprehensive and integrated coverage serves as a provisional descriptor, not necessarily indicative of a sustained commitment to the established principles of health media.

V. The Algerian Media's Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

1. Contextual Dynamics at the National and International Levels

Algeria encountered a significant public health crisis shortly after undergoing substantial social and political transformations. This period posed a formidable challenge for the authorities, who lacked a coherent strategy for crisis management. Media entities, similarly unprepared, struggled to navigate the evolving crisis, shifting between various media treatment strategies to address the rapid progression of the pandemic and its extensive socio-political and economic ramifications.

The onset of COVID-19 effectively subdued all organized protest activities, regardless of their objectives, which were part of the 2019 Hirak. While protest organizers declared the suspension temporary, taken as a precautionary measure to prevent the virus spread among participants, they vowed to resume activities once the pandemic receded (Majri, 2020, p. 218). Nonetheless, the protests effectively ceased during the initial months of the pandemic.

Amidst the broader developmental challenges facing the nation—economically and socially—and under extraordinary international circumstances characterized by plummeting oil prices during the pandemic, Algeria found itself grappling with a compounded crisis management scenario. One manifestation was the prolonged liquidity shortage in national currency at banks and postal centers, propelling the economy into a strenuous period. The government implemented a series of preventive measures starting with the shutdown of borders and cessation of transportation by air, sea, and land; closure of educational institutions and public spaces; reduction of workforce in essential sectors; and the enforcement of partial to complete curfews, followed by mandatory home quarantines.

However, these procedures were often criticized for their belated implementation and the absence of viable alternatives to alleviate their negative repercussions on everyday life. The delayed enforcement of air and sea travel restrictions and the initial inadequate management of incoming travelers did not correspond with the assessed risk

levels. Moreover, compensatory measures for businesses and individuals financially impacted by the cessation of activities were slow to materialize. Public discontent was further fueled by the healthcare system's inability to adequately manage the care of patients infected with the virus or to conduct sufficient diagnostic testing, which subsequently influenced the surge in infection rates reported daily in the media.

2. Media's Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

2.1. Media Closure and Secrecy During the Pandemic

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Algerian audio-visual media, encompassing both private and public broadcasters such as Echorouk TV, Ennahar, and Algerie 3, primarily served as conduits between governmental bodies managing the pandemic and the citizenry compelled to rely on these channels for information. These media outlets largely aligned with governmental narratives, disseminating policies and strategies without engaging in critical analysis or providing comprehensive coverage. The predominance of numerical data and news updates overshadowed the absence of in-depth investigative reporting, visual content, analytical critiques, and substantive dialogues. Notably, the media did not sufficiently challenge government strategies, leading to programming that failed to adequately address the public's informational needs or contribute to health security aspirations.

This situation prompted significant criticism from media professionals. Taher Fatani, editor-in-chief of Echorouk News, highlighted the restrictive practices on information dissemination, confined to the Health Ministry's daily briefings, which presented statistics without enabling journalistic inquiry. This approach resulted in monotonous coverage that focused narrowly on virus awareness and the importance of quarantine measures, which researcher Mohamed Kirat critiqued as lacking in professional crisis management standards. ("Algerian Media Crisis During the Coronavirus Crisis," 2020)

Moreover, the Health Ministry's daily announcements regarding infection and fatality rates were perceived by many as underestimating the crisis's actual severity. This perception was reinforced by social media content, which depicted overwhelmed healthcare facilities unable to accommodate the surge of patients, many of whom were turned away untested, thereby excluding them from official statistics. Medical professionals, through the same digital platforms, reported infection and mortality figures significantly exceeding those officially declared.

The discrepancy between officially disseminated data and the reality depicted through alternative media sources significantly undermined public trust in the media's reported figures, detrimentally affecting its credibility. When citizens distrust governmental policies and media reports, it can lead to disillusionment and susceptibility to conspiracy theories, undermining civic engagement and the collective effort required for national development. This is particularly problematic in an environment inundated with global news about the pandemic's persistence and rapid spread.

2.2. The Lack of a Coherent Media Strategy in Crisis Response

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a formidable challenge to Algerian television channels, which were found wanting in robust crisis management strategies. This deficiency stemmed from inadequate training that failed to emphasize the imperatives of transparency and full disclosure. Abdelaziz Touigar, the director of the National News

Network, criticized the relevant authorities for their insufficient openness in managing the pandemic's information flow. Journalist Othman Lahyani linked the Algerian media's ineffectual performance during the crisis to the enduring effects of its structural and systemic crises. While global media outlets have pivoted to focus on health, environmental, and climate issues, Algerian media remains mired in antiquated practices dominated by political narratives. ("Crisis in Algerian Media During the Coronavirus Pandemic," 2020)

Initially, Algerian channels adopted a pacifying approach, reassuring the public through news and campaigns that the health situation was well-managed and under control, according to the authorities' implemented measures. Citizens were urged to adhere to established health protocols, including wearing masks, maintaining personal hygiene, hand washing and sanitization, and observing social distancing—practices endorsed by health experts globally.

This initial approach inadvertently contributed to worsening the crisis by underestimating the pandemic's early spread, particularly as the initial measures were not robust enough for effective crisis management. However, as the pandemic's impact intensified across the nation, Algerian media shifted towards a more sensationalist approach, intensifying news coverage and campaigns that employed fearmongering to deter public complacency about the virus's rapid spread and its severe impact on health. This sensationalist shift led to the adoption of unprofessional methods, where broadcasters aired distressing scenes of patients suffering and dying in hospitals, overcrowded intensive care units, cemeteries during funerals of virus victims, and live testimonies from despondent individuals who had lost loved ones due to non-compliance with preventive measures. These practices diverged significantly from professional and ethical media standards.

Conclusion:

As indicated earlier, effective health media requires persistent support for the public, providing accurate information about diseases and viruses to enhance their understanding of potential health risks. This support should extend practical advice and guidance on adopting beneficial activities and habits to prevent sudden health complications and manage ongoing health crises. Therefore, health media should transcend mere crisis communication to become a sustained communicative presence before, during, and after health crises, aiming to raise public health awareness continually.

Media professionals overseeing television content must devise both immediate and long-term strategies for handling various crises, enabling decision-making that collaborates effectively with government bodies, specialized agencies, and field experts. This strategic approach should avoid ad hoc interactions with the public and professional missteps that could exacerbate rather than ameliorate a crisis.

The global upheaval wrought by the coronavirus underscores the need for solidarity and responsible media practices that provide the public with precise and balanced information, avoiding both understatement and exaggeration. Algerian media must develop effective communicative and media strategies that are resilient to crisis impacts, aiming to counteract misinformation and rumor proliferation. Concurrently, authorities must maintain transparency and strategic foresight in crisis management, moving away from manipulative practices in an era where information verification is accessible to all.

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