

Pandemic Media: Communicating Risk in Malawi in the Age of Covid-19

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Abstract

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Pandemic Media: Communicating Risk in Malawi in the Age of Covid-19

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This study assesses the effectiveness of media and communication initiatives during the current Covid-19 pandemic in Lilongwe, Malawi. Media is a very important tool for communicating with people during public health emergencies such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. This is true in any country around the world, but even more in countries with limited resources such as Malawi. Governments and their partners rely on an approach called Risk Communication to provide relevant information to the general public and to promote behaviors and practices. However, critics have argued that Risk Communication is an expert driven top-down approach that fails to address the real needs of people in public health emergencies.

Using the culture centered approach (CCA) theory, this study assesses the participation of audiences in the development of media and communication policies, strategies, and initiatives. Through the key concepts of agency, culture, and structure the study analyzes the gaps existing in current approaches and makes recommendations on how they can be improved. The study also assesses the absence of uncertainty in Risk Communication theory and practice and recommends integrating the concept to strengthen the study and practice of Risk Communication.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my late father Mr. Jim Daniel Mtengo Khangamwa, affectionately known as JDM, for teaching me the value of education. I wish you were still around to see for yourself the fruits of your labor of love. Keep resting in peace big man!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of communication and media in the context of public health emergencies including the current Covid-19 pandemic in Malawi. The study took place in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi which is in the central region of the country. While this study was undertaken in the context of Covid-19, it is not a study of Covid-19 per se but uses the pandemic as a case study for a public health emergency. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared that Covid-19 was a global pandemic on 11th March 2020, recommended guidelines that governments and other stakeholders should implement to control the spread of the pandemic (WHO, 2020). The government of Malawi, along with its partners such as agencies of the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, and the media have all been active to implement the WHO guidelines.

As an example, the Malawi government did attempt unsuccessfully to institute a lockdown in the early days of the pandemic, but faced political and legal challenges that stopped it from implementing nationwide lockdowns (Tengatenga et al., 2021). The legal challenges were both directly against the lockdown orders, as well as indirectly, because of the onset of the pandemic, coincided with a legal challenge to the presidential elections which were held in 2019. The presidential elections were already being challenged in the courts when the global pandemic was declared by WHO in March 2020. Both legal challenges are significant because the court ruled in the challenge on lockdowns that it was illegal to ban public gatherings and so the lockdowns could not be enforced (Nyasulu

et al., 2021). In the other legal challenge, the courts ruled that the presidential elections of 2019 were nullified, and fresh elections should take place within a period of sixty days.

If both rulings are taken together, where on the one hand the government cannot enforce lockdowns, at the same time the presidential elections were to be rerun, which meant political parties could hold large rallies, the idea of limiting contact between people became impractical. In addition to the practical aspect of the rulings on the ability of the government to institute lockdowns, the nullification of the presidential elections also brought into question the legitimacy of the government and its overall ability to govern (Chirwa et al., 2021). It is therefore very clear that Malawi suffered from a leadership gap in the early days of the pandemic and the consequences of the failure to act were to be felt soon after elections when the first wave of Covid-19 cases hit the country (Chirwa et al., 2021).

These political and legal challenges that coincided with the onset of the pandemic, undermined the government's capacity to effectively deal with the pandemic even though Malawi has experience in dealing with other public health emergencies (Chirwa et al., 2021). In addition to the political and legal challenges, the return of Malawian immigrants from foreign lands particularly South Africa, contributed significantly to the increase of Covid-19 cases (Nyasulu et al., 2021). At the time, South Africa was one of the countries with the highest number of Covid-19 cases in the world, and definitely in Africa. There is a very long history of immigration of people from Malawi and other southern African countries to South Africa in search of economic opportunities dating back to colonial times. This trend has continued to this day,

however, the onset of the pandemic led to the institution of strict lockdowns in South Africa leading to the closure of businesses and left most immigrant Malawians destitute. The government of Malawi responded by organizing transportation to bring back those Malawians who wanted to come back home (Nyasulu et al., 2021). The government tried to place them in special camps at sports stadiums, but they all left for their various communities before the prescribed period of isolation had been observed.

In order to understand the pandemic in Malawi, it is important to understand the socio-economic, historical, and health conditions that have an impact on regular people. Malawi is a country with an estimated population of 20.2 million people according to the United Nations agency for population UNFPA. The country is in the southeastern part of Africa, and shares borders with three countries, namely, Mozambique, Zambia, and Tanzania. Historically, Malawi attained independence from Great Britain in 1964 and was ruled as a one-party dictatorship for 31 years by its first president Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Dr Banda was a medical doctor who was trained in the United States and in Scotland. He practiced as a medical doctor in London, England and Kumasi, Ghana, before returning to Malawi, which was then called Nyasaland. Dr Banda was defeated in multiparty elections in 1994, and Malawi has since had general elections every five years until 2019 when the constitutional court nullified the elections due to fraudulent practices (Chirwa et al., 2021).

Economically, Malawi is considered one of the least developed countries which ranks at 174 out of 189 countries on the human development index of the United Nations agency for development (UNDP). The country's economy is dependent on agriculture,

principally tobacco production, and is supplemented by exports of tea, coffee, and sugar. Agriculture contributes to the employment of 80% of the population and contributes a third to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Schuenemann et al., 2018). Agriculture is not just a national economic activity, but it is the only source of survival and sustenance for a large part of the population, with 90% of those involved in agriculture being smallholder subsistence farmers. In addition, Malawi also suffers from its geographical location as a land locked country which lacks access to the sea which makes the landing cost of imported goods and services very expensive. However, the country is blessed with the eighth largest freshwater lake in the world and various mountains that form part of its relatively small tourism industry.

These historical and economic conditions affect Malawi's health services which emphasize public health measures and disease prevention out of necessity, since curative services tend to be more expensive. The country has an extensive network of community health workers who conduct outreach services in communities which are very far from health services which are also affected by poor road networks especially in rural areas. The community health network is made up of community nurses and a cadre of auxiliaries known as health surveillance assistants (HSAs) (Kok et al., 2020). However, these community health workers are not equipped to deal with complicated medical cases, which must be referred to health facilities and these facilities are perennially understaffed and have regular shortages of drugs and supplies (Ngwira et al., 2021). Even though health services are free in government institutions, the shortages in drugs and

supplies, coupled with medical staff that is overworked and underpaid, seriously undermines the quality of services in these facilities.

Considering the aforementioned challenges, and facing an increase in Covid-19 cases, the government of Malawi has relied heavily on risk communication, as the strategy to provide its population with critical information on how to prevent Covid-19. Such efforts have been mostly through radio and television and to a lesser extent, social media (Bendau et al., 2020). The importance of communication and media during epidemics, disease outbreaks and emergencies cannot be overemphasized, but it is even more significant during the current Covid-19 pandemic. While vaccines and therapeutics are readily available here in the United States and other rich nations, the situation is not the same in the rest of the world especially Malawi where vaccines and therapeutics had been very scarce in the early days of the pandemic (Nurith Aizenman, 2021). This meant that a majority of the population were completely reliant on effective Covid-19 prevention measures through adoption of preventive practices, and behaviors including wearing masks, social distancing and washing hands with soap.

The promotion of preventive behaviors and practices using media and other communication approaches is not a novel idea, it has been an integral part of the work supported by United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for decades. UN agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and governmental aid agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have provided technical and financial support to change behaviors using media and communication. Much of this support has gone to countries in

Africa, Asia, and Latin America to implement such communication and media initiatives in support of disease prevention and in response to outbreaks (Lie & Servaes, 2015).

Such initiatives are known by different iterations such as communication for development (C4D) and communication for behavior and social change (CBSC), depending on the agencies supporting the initiatives (Servaes & Lie, 2015). I will discuss these terminologies at length in the literature review section below.

However, while C4D is the overarching approach to behavior and social change, with respect to pandemics, outbreaks and emergencies, there is a specific approach within C4D that is known as crisis communication or risk communication (Lie & Servaes, 2015). This genre of communication is designed with similar outcomes to C4D, namely: adoption of preventive and mitigating practices, habits, and behaviors to manage emergencies and outbreaks. While risk communication is embedded within the C4D approach, it does have unique theories that set it apart as a distinct genre within C4D (Glik, 2007). While risk communication is predominantly social scientific, this study approaches risk communication from a critical perspective using the culture centered approach theory (CCA). This theory focuses on marginalized people's agency and ability to communicate within their cultures, to context structural barriers to services that are designed from a framework that is defined by neoliberal development ideology (Dutta, 2016).

According to Dutta (2018), the culture centered approach focuses on the agency of marginalized peoples, as it is enacted in the context of their culture to resist structural barriers as they communicatively navigate healthcare and development as a whole.

Within the CCA formulation, marginalized people who were hitherto seen as lacking agency, and incapacitated by outdated cultural beliefs, are seen as people who are capable of solving their own problems. And in the event that they cannot solve systemic problems that affect their lives, they are at least seen as a central part of the solution. Therefore the ability of marginalized peoples to articulate their own challenges and chart a solution for those problems is a central feature of the CCA approach (Dutta & Basu, 2008).

This critical CCA driven approach is relevant to the current study in view of the critique against risk communication that it privileges a top-down expert driven approach to communication (Dodoo & Hugman, 2012). As part of the culture aspect of the study, I will also explore the concept of *Ubuntu* which will localize and contextualize Malawian culture, which by extension also reflects the cultures of neighboring nations in southern and eastern Africa (Oppenheim, 2012). The philosophy of *Ubuntu* highlights the connection between an individual and their community, where the essence of humanness itself is tied to the humanity of one's community. The *Ubuntu* philosophy has been studied and debated extensively in South Africa, since the days of apartheid, through the emancipation of the black majority, and continues today as a unifying philosophy in politics, business, and education (Nxumalo & Mncube, 2018). This should not suggest that it is a uniquely South African philosophy, because it is also native to Malawi, where it is known as *UMunthu* in the national language, Chichewa. The widespread nature of *Ubuntu* particularly in southern and eastern Africa is acknowledged by Oppenheim (2012), who cites other examples in *Tswana*, *Kinyarwanda* and *Kiswahili* communities.

In addition to CCA, another important concept that sheds light on how people deal with emergencies is uncertainty, which describes how people try to find ways to resolve significant disruptions to their normal lives (Afifi et al., 2014). Even though uncertainty is an important concept during emergencies and outbreaks, a close study of risk communication reveals the absence of this concept. I believe that this is a significant oversight, and uncertainty should not be overlooked, but should be integral to any response to pandemics, outbreaks, and emergencies within the framework of risk communication. While it seems obvious that uncertainty should be a part of risk communication, its absence could be partly explained by Lie and Servaes (2015), who state that risk communication is a subdivision of communication science. Communication science focuses mostly on measurable outcomes emanating from a set of inputs and behaviors. But the theory of problematic integration (PI), which I will use in this study to explore uncertainty, focuses on the communicative experience of dealing with uncertainty (Russell & Babrow, 2011). However, uncertainty in the PI approach has mostly focused on individual struggles in western settings and not in a widespread pandemic, or in a non-western collectivist context. And this is a gap that this study contributes to addressing, by looking at new ways of understanding uncertainty in a collectivist African setting.

In trying to understand why media and communication strategies have not successfully led to the adoption of prevention measures, as stated by Aggarwal and colleagues (2020), it is important to address some important questions. These questions include the following: why have there been so many challenges with vaccine uptake

among individuals? Why has there been many conspiracy theories that have flourished relating to the origins of Covid-19 and religious beliefs about end-times (Tengatenga et al., 2021). There are other questions that also need to be addressed and this study will delve into these questions guided by the theories outlined above. The first part of this study examined the effectiveness of C4D/CBSC in the promotion of health practices in pre- and post-emergency settings as well as under-resourced health care settings, focusing on a Malawian context. The second part of the study examined the role of risk communication in the mobilization of communities, focusing on the effectiveness of current approaches in addressing the communicative needs of audiences. The third part of the study explored uncertainty to shed light on the struggles and needs of individuals and communities as they deal with public health emergencies communicatively. These are matters that are tied inexorably to media and communication not only in a practical sense, but philosophically as well. As people grapple with the deeper questions of mortality that has come to the fore due to the fatality of the pandemic, they look for strength and meaning from those around them.

Finally, in terms of methodology, this study followed a qualitative approach which is the recommended approach to answer the key questions in this study, in line with the CCA and PI theories which favor a narrative/descriptive approach to data collection. I used open ended semi structured interview guides to conduct in-person interviews with different categories of people that play a significant role in pandemic media and communication in Malawi. The categories of interviewees included: government media experts at national and district levels; a communication expert from

the United Nations Agency for Children (UNICEF); a media expert from a non-governmental organization; a media expert from a media house; community leaders; and community members, both male and female. These categories were based on the media and communication landscape in Malawi, where the government receives direct technical and financial for media and communication from UN agencies and other donors. In addition, non-governmental organizations also play an important role in C4D as well as risk communication. Malawi also has a vibrant independent media landscape since the advent of multiparty democracy in 1994 and plays an important role of informing, entertaining, and educating the public. Community leaders also play an important role of communicating with their community members, but they are also part of the audience for media along with community members.

Data analysis started during, and continued after data collection, starting with verbatim transcription of the interviews followed by a review of field notes from observations in the field. This was followed by open coding which according to Corbin and Strauss (1990), affords the researcher the ability to compare events/actions/interactions to see if there are commonalities within the text or if there are differences in the personal narratives. The next stage was code sorting which according to Charmaz (2015), involved theoretical sampling, exhausting all relevant codes followed by code sorting which facilitates theoretical reconstruction. Following open coding, I then applied axial coding which helped to link related categories and subcategories based on the conditions, context, strategies, and consequences. Following axial coding, I then applied selective coding which according to Corbin and Strauss (1990), helps a

researcher to unify all categories under the core category and provides details for other categories accordingly. Selective coding was then implemented towards the end of the study and in line with Corbin and Strauss (1990), to identify the main categories of the study. I then embarked on writing the findings of the study and then discussing them through the lens of the key theories in this study, namely CCA and PI.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As alluded to in the introduction above, I chose to frame this study in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to use the pandemic as a case study for public health emergencies in large part because Covid-19 is the most serious public health emergency of our time. However, due to the novelty of Covid-19, there is a limited but growing body of literature on the subject, and thus this study will contribute to the communication and media literature on the pandemic. However, this also means that this literature review will not primarily focus on Covid-19 but will focus on media and communication and the relationship to public health emergencies, with a focus on Malawi and its experiences with the pandemic.

Malawian Context

Malawi has an estimated population of 20.2 million people, of which an estimated 80% live in rural areas where access to resources is limited, including health services and media. As of 31st August 2022, Malawi had registered 87,842 cases and 2,675 deaths due to Covid-19, and 4,121,001 vaccine doses had been administered representing around 20% of the population (WHO, 2022). Such a low coverage of vaccination makes the reliance on other prevention methods such as wearing face masks, isolating the sick, and washing hands more pertinent now and in future, until a significant portion of the population has been vaccinated. The adoption of prevention practices, including the promotion of vaccination is dependent on effective media and communication initiatives, thus emphasizing their significance in the fight against Covid-19. The government of Malawi has undertaken several initiatives to control the pandemic, including: declaring a

state of emergency; closing land borders and restricting flights; complemented by a risk communication campaign to promote prevention (Munthali & Xuelian, 2020).

Geographically, Malawi is a landlocked country located in south-east Africa and it shares borders with Tanzania to the north, Zambia to the east and Mozambique to the southwest, south, and southeastern parts of the country. Malawi, just like other African countries, was once colonized by the British empire, and attained self-determination in 1963 followed by independence in 1964. The country was ruled as a one-party dictatorship under the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), which had transitioned from its predecessor the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC). The change in name of the party reflected the change in the name of the country which was known as Nyasaland prior to independence.

The first steps in Malawi formally becoming a British protectorate were taken in 1889 in parts of southern Malawi and then later in 1891 covering the entire country, and was known as Nyasaland districts, later changing to British Central Africa (BCA) (Lovering, 2010). In 1907 BCA was renamed Nyasaland with a governor appointed by the British colonialists as the head of government. The name Nyasaland was adopted from the *Yao* name for lake which is *Nyasa*. Lake Nyasa, or lake Malawi as it is currently known, is the eighth largest freshwater lake in the world. It is the most significant natural feature as it covers almost a third of the country and it is considered one of the richest terms of species with hundreds of different species found in the lake (Pinho et al., 2019). In 1953, a federation made up of Nyasaland, northern Rhodesia (modern day Zambia), and southern Rhodesia (modern day Zimbabwe), was established (Kalinga, 2005). The

federation was known as the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland but was also known as the Central African Federation which ended in 1963 prior to Malawian and Zambian independence in 1964. This was the final chapter of British rule in Malawi, but British influence has continued to this day not least through the Commonwealth of nations which brings together all former British colonies led by the British.

As already alluded to, Malawi attained political independence under the MCP which was led by Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who ruled Malawi as a one-party dictatorship from 1964 to 1994. Dr. Banda was a medical doctor who was trained at Meharry Medical College in the United States and set up his own practice in London and Kumasi, Ghana (previously known as the Gold Coast) (Messac, 2020). As an absolute dictator, Dr. Banda assumed the title of life president and conqueror (*Ngwazi*) which meant that he had total control of all aspects of life in the country. However even with such powers, he coopted a traditional leadership structure that had continued during British colonial rule, and despite political machinations has continued to be influential to this day.

Malawi's cultural influences can be traced to several areas in Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where Malawi's largest tribe, the Chewas are believed to have emigrated from (Wasambo Kayira, 2021). Indeed, the Chewa are not only found in Malawi, but are also found in Zambia where the modern-day Chewa king resides, as well as in Mozambique where a large population of Chewas are also found. Another tribe, the Ngoni, emigrated from South Africa, fleeing from the wars of Shaka Zulu, and settled predominantly in the central and northern regions of the country

including the south of Tanzania (Mphande, 1993). Aside from these two major tribes, the other tribes like the *Yao* and the *Lhomwe* trace their origins from neighboring Mozambique. It is important to note that having multiple tribes with diverse origins brings a diversity of culture and languages, although Chichewa is the designated national language. There are many similarities between the modern-day *Ngoni* people and the *Nguni* peoples of Southern Africa, just as the *Chewas*, *Yaos* and *Lhomwes* all share similar values with their kinsmen in neighboring countries.

Traditional leaders in these tribal groupings have continuously exercised authority within their tribal groups especially in land allocation and settling of minor conflicts that can be handled outside the formal legal system. As earlier indicated, this authority has been there since the colonial times and has continued through the Banda dictatorship as well as in the post-Banda period in the country. Due to the influential positions that traditional leaders hold in their communities, they have been used extensively to communicate on developmental and other issues including the current Covid-19 pandemic. While some traditional leaders have been tainted by politics which brings into question their neutrality and fairness, they are otherwise accepted as apolitical and an important part of the local power structure. Over the years, the government has also tried to standardize the power structures of the different tribal groups, but the power to replace chiefs is still left in the hands of tribes themselves.

One area where traditional leaders have not been as influential is the health services sector, which has always been a formal government institution that is outside of their jurisdiction. Even though Malawi provides free health services to its people, the

quality of those services has consistently been poor. The health sector in Malawi is one that has been characterized by mismanagement, poor resource allocation, and shortages in essential drugs, and skilled workers since the days of the Kamuzu Banda regime (Messac, 2020). These challenges have continued to the present day, which has made the response to the pandemic very complicated due to these underlying health care problems. Currently Malawi has 2,582 physicians, 6,025 nurses and 10,016 community health workers, which for a population of 20.2 million people is very low (Ahmat et al., 2022). For instance, government guidelines indicate that 1 community health worker is supposed to serve 1,000 people, which means with the current numbers, Malawi needs to add another 10,000 community health workers to meet this standard. And while the numbers are low as shown above, there is also an uneven distribution of the few health workers with a bias on urban areas, which exacerbates the health challenges in rural areas.

Malawi has four referral hospitals that are located in the four major cities of the country as the highest level of health care that is staffed with various medical specialists who provide care for mostly complicated medical cases. Below the level of the referral hospitals, there are district hospitals which are located at respective district headquarters throughout the country. These district hospitals also serve as the first level of referrals especially for maternity cases that cannot be handled at health center level, which is the lowest level of health care. The health center level is where community nurses and health surveillance assistants (HSAs) operate from, reaching out to communities to provide basic primary health care. Their services include weighing children to assess their growth and nutritional needs, as well as providing vaccination to children under the age of five.

However, over the years, the roles of these HSAs has grown so much to include the treatment of childhood illnesses such as malaria, diarrhea, and pneumonia (Ngwira et al., 2021). Even though HSAs are simply auxiliary health workers, the growth of their responsibilities over the years have been as an escape valve for the pressure emanating from the persistent shortage of skilled manpower. For example, as an added responsibility to the tasks that I have already outlined, HSAs are also responsible for providing contraceptive services, awareness raising, health education and referrals for complicated cases (Kok et al., 2020).

As outlined previously, an emphasis on prevention services particularly awareness raising, health education, media and other communication approaches is borne out of necessity and is a key component of the national public health strategy. These communicative efforts are predicated on the assumption that an increase in knowledge and awareness will lead to the adoption of recommended preventive practices. One study that was conducted during the early days of the pandemic, found that knowledge related to how Covid-19 is transmitted, how it develops once it has been transmitted and the severity of the disease was very low (Banda et al., 2020). Such low levels of knowledge were particularly more pronounced in rural communities because previous media and communication campaigns have favored urban areas which have better access to media and communication technologies. However, the focus on knowledge as a predictor of behavior change, has been challenged by other studies such as Matovu and colleagues (2021) which found that high rates of awareness of Covid-19 did not translate into adoption of preventive measures in east Africa. This lack of synergy between increased

knowledge and better attitudes, and adoption of preventive practices needs to be further examined to learn the reasons for such divergence. Indeed, while the focus in messaging has been on preventing disease transmission, there are other challenges that communities face including socio-economic problems. Such challenges include loss of income at household level caused by the closure of small and informal businesses, as a direct consequence of the pandemic despite Malawi not successfully instituting a lockdown (Aggarwal et al., 2020).

In addition to economic concerns, the restrictions on public gatherings has had a big impact on social activities including religious communities in a country where religion is a very significant part of people's lives (Tengatenga et al., 2021). As a consequence of the restrictions to public gatherings, other important social functions, particularly funerals were also affected as victims of Covid-19 were being buried by health officials within hours of death (Tengatenga et al., 2021). This denied families the opportunity to give their loved ones a dignified funeral with religious rites which is a very important part of grieving in Malawi. In addition, there are gaps in government policy dealing with Covid-19, which focuses on risk communication, testing, public gatherings, and broad macro level socio-economic issues (Mzumara et al., 2021). The Malawian policy response lacks a nuanced approach that looks at the negative impacts of the pandemic guidelines on socially sensitive functions and how dissatisfaction and grievances would undermine adherence to the guidelines. For instance, religion and culture are very strong forces which intersect during funerals and weddings, and cannot simply be dismissed through a policy directive, even with the threat of force.

One may argue that Malawi did not have an effective response in the early days of the pandemic because of the political environment at the time, the legal context as well as the return of Malawian migrants from countries like South Africa around May 2020 (Banda et al., 2021). On the political front, the nullification of the presidential elections of 2019 unleashed a political campaign season as the court ordered new presidential elections to be held in 2020 (Tengatenga et al., 2021). The ensuing political campaign rallies attracted tens of thousands of people in close proximity to each other and any attempts to ban such gatherings was simply impractical, as people felt that the pandemic was being used by an illegitimate government to clamp down on the opposition. On the legal front, a lockdown order was successfully challenged in the courts and the government was ordered to lift the lockdown because it was unconstitutional (Mzumara et al., 2021). These two major events as well as the return of thousands of Malawian immigrants from South Africa, which at the time was the epicenter of the epidemic on the African continent seriously undermined all efforts to control the epidemic. However, while these challenges were there, the government bureaucracy was still able to shut down schools, places of worship, restrict entry at land ports and airports as well as instituting mask mandates in government institutions (Patel et al., 2020).

With the passing of time, people's acceptance of Covid-19 as a fatal pandemic has increased, to some extent because they have seen the deadly outcomes of the disease within their communities, as well as the deaths of prominent national leaders. On 12 January 2021, two senior cabinet ministers died from Covid-19. This was an unprecedented event in Malawi as their deaths came on a day when several other political

leaders had also succumbed to the virus (Oxford Analytica, 2021). The acceptance that Covid-19 should be taken seriously has also coincided with the onset of vaccination, although vaccine hesitancy has negatively affected the rollout, as it has done in other countries. However, illness and death seems to have made the conversations about the pandemic more mainstream, as Tenga and colleagues (2021), argue that in an African context, the illness of one is equivalent to the illness of the whole community. This study will explore such nuances even as it takes place in the context of the rise of the Covid-19 delta variant, low vaccine coverage. On the other hand, there are also positive trends such as political stability, as well as an increase in vaccination and other prevention measures such as the wearing of masks.

Communication for Development

Communication for development (C4D), is defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), as “an evidence based and participatory process that facilitates the engagement of children, families, communities, the public and decision makers towards achieving positive social and behavior change in both development and humanitarian contexts through a mix of available communication platforms and tools” (UNICEF, 2019, p.7). The concept that UNICEF refers to as C4D, is also known by several different names such as communication for social change, development communication, and participatory communication. It seems that such names are influenced by the organizations that are funding or implementing the communication initiatives (Agunga, 2019.; Lie & Servaes, 2015; Obregón & Tufte, 2017). However, all these conceptualizations of communication have a common ideological founding and

guiding principles that are similar to what UNICEF has outlined in its definition of C4D. There is a focus on behavior and social change through the use of communication and media resources across the different forms of C4D (Fox & Obregón, 2014; Servaes & Lie, 2015).

Understanding how C4D is constituted, how it has been executed in certain contexts, and the critiques that have been made is important to appreciate the gaps that still exist between the theoretical conceptualization and the practical application in developing country contexts. Because of the plurality of C4D approaches, there are different ways of categorizing this broad sphere of theory and practice. For instance, Lie and Servaes (2015), highlight a subdivision of communication for development and social change (CDSC) into five categories namely: behavior change communication (BCC); mass communication (MC); advocacy communication (AC); participatory communication (PC); and communication for structural and sustainable social change (CSSC). On the other hand, Agunga (2019), argues that C4D is part science, part art and part craft, based on its theoretical and methodological foundations and the inherent need for artistic talents that are required to operate communication equipment among other skills. Adding to their other categorization, Servaes and Lie (2015) propose another way of analyzing C4D that focuses on two methodological schools. The first school uses communication campaigns and marketing techniques to increase knowledge and change attitudes; and the second school focuses on processes of participation, empowerment, and democratization. This study will focus on the first school, which is the most common

approach to C4D/CDSC among practitioners but will rely on the second school to examine the weaknesses and critiques of the approach.

While all these categorizations are useful, there is yet another categorization that is less complicated and may align better with current research and practice. To arrive at this categorization, a mapping exercise was undertaken and it identified three lines of research and practice (Wilkins et al., 2014). These three lines of C4D/CDSC research and practice operate as follows: using communication and media to catalyze social, cultural, and political change; using communication for social mobilization and political change by activists; and media-focused approaches.

Beyond these categorizations, there are documented success stories and one of the success stories attributed to the application of C4D is improvement in the effectiveness of poverty reduction programs (Agunga, 2019). Most of these poverty reduction programs have been tied to international aid for which communication is one of the key strategies. Also critical to the successful implementation of C4D in support of these poverty reduction programs are C4D professionals who are responsible for interpreting and applying the relevant principles (Agunga, 2019). Poverty reduction programs are implemented as a key component of development and this focus on development is the broadest scope of C4D. However, in many cases C4D is applied in more specialized areas of programming such as public health, sanitation, or nutrition. What is interesting is that even in those specialized outcome areas, the results of C4D are framed as contributing to development. There is also general agreement among practitioners and scholars that a bottom-up approach where communities participate in these C4D/CDSC tends to produce

better results than a focus on top-down approaches. However, Obregón and Tufte (2017), caution that there should be a balance between “change from below,” and movements led from “above” especially as it relates to the role of technological innovation in communication.

Another area where the success of C4D approaches has been documented more comprehensively is Entertainment-Education (EE). This is an approach which combines entertainment and education on multiple media platforms mostly electronic and social media to increase knowledge, change attitudes and promote social change (Riley et al., 2017). Classical EE functions by attracting people’s attention through entertainment, which is then followed by education which is meant to transfer knowledge as a precursor to changes in attitude and behavior. According to Riley and colleagues (2017), a comprehensive search of best practices in Entertainment-Education participation identified four categories namely: visual methods, oral methods, written methods and listening methods. However, Papa and colleagues (2000), caution against looking at EE simplistically because social change cannot be accomplished by an individual, as it is dependent on dialogic processes and joint action with other people.

One of the most successful examples of EE projects is the South African television drama *Tsha Tsha*, which was created based on contemporary EE principles with a human rights focus, as well as an emphasis on local knowledge and culture (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). The *Tsha Tsha* television drama relied on formative research to incorporate the voices of subaltern youth audiences and to bring into focus the cultural context of the audiences, that gave the producers of the TV drama insight into the

lived experiences of their audience. This is a very good example of how C4D interventions provide space for audiences to participate in the creation and implementation of media productions aimed at changing behavior. But even though the audiences did participate, a closer assessment of the TV drama design established that while the drama series relied on input from the audience, it was initiated by an external organization and donors. The final creative and content decisions were still made by the experts and commissioners of the project and not the local people. As a result, the ideological values of implementing organizations and their donors, did exert significant influence on the framing of the drama both overtly and covertly (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018).

In fact, the issue of ideological influences is one of the key critiques of the Entertainment Education approach as well as C4D and social change broadly from what Servaes and Lie (2015) categorized as the second school of CDSC above. One of the most notable critics of C4D/CDSC is Dutta (2015), who argues that the development ideology has always served the interests of capital since the early days of C4D just after the second world war. Dutta (2015) argues that in the early days, development was conceptualized as modernization, and in this view of development, local cultures were cast as deleterious to development. Over the years, the perception of culture as a negative influence on development has changed and it has been co-opted and celebrated as an important catalyst of development. However, when culture is looked at through the prism of the two schools of C4D, it is a contested site. While the first school sees culture as a site for participation in development discourse, the second school looks at culture as a

site of resistance to hegemonic development discourse and a tool for liberation (Olufowote, 2011). In addition to culture as a contested site between hegemonic development discourse and post-colonial and critical communication scholars, the question of how the voice of the marginalized is reflected in media discourse is another point of contestation (Dutta, 2018).

The issue with culture is not just whether it is incorporated into the design of communication for development and social change or not, but who defines culture, and how it is framed are the critical questions that contemporary C4D has to grapple with. Dutta (2018), argues that culture is conceptualized within the framework of neoliberal development discourse as artefacts that can be commodified and traded for profit. As opposed to a contested and dynamic space of meaning making with sub-altern groups at the center of the development enterprise. In this neoliberal conceptualization of culture, sub-altern groups have no agency and have no voice except as coopted participants. This framing does not consider the ontological and epistemological differences that exist between western societies where neoliberalism originated and the global south, where these western concepts are applied in a cookie-cutter fashion (Ndhlovu, 2017).

This issue of culture is also intimately connected to identity and fraternity, and according to Metz (2012), there is a fundamental difference in the way western society and many African societies are constituted. This difference especially lies in how they determine one's humanness, with the western perspective of "I" as opposed to the African perspective of "we" which centers personhood on relations with other people. Metz (2012), continues to argue that while the idea of connection with others is not a

completely unique African value, it is more salient in African communities in a way that is different to other societies, especially in the west. This means that the issue of conceptualizing culture goes beyond a debate of who is right or wrong, between mainstream neoliberal development discourse or its critics, it is a question of ontological orientation. According to Mbembe (2015), a Eurocentric canon as the dominant canon privileges the western way of knowing and disregards other ways of knowing and thus C4D discounts other ways of knowing.

The unique feature in African learning and communication is a foundation in oral traditions which are predominantly performative and highly interactive, combining body movement, gestures, and sound to complement language (Kendrick & Mutonyi, 2007). Even the language itself is couched in creative traditions that have served to educate and inculcate traditional values and life lessons especially among young African men and women. According to Boateng (1983), communities in Africa have relied on fables, myths, legends, and proverbs to achieve various communicative and educational goals including supporting intergenerational communication. These four approaches to traditional communication have helped African societies in different ways, as outlined by Boateng (1983), fables have been used to teach young people societal values; while myths have been used for morality, authority, ritual, law, and sanction, while proverbs have been used to validate traditional procedures and beliefs.

The question of culturally relevant communication is very important in the positioning of C4D as a catalyst of change. This is affirmed by Dutta (2015), who argues that culture as defined by the neoliberal development is an ally of the mainstream

development discourse that is not only represented by cultural artefacts that can be traded. It also coopts participation of excluded communities through participatory language of choice. This approach to development discourse is partly the reason why the culture centered approach focuses on the agency of subaltern communities. Specifically, their role in defining their development needs within the context of their culture and in opposition to structural factors that exacerbate their exclusion (Dutta, 2018). The culture centered approach also foregrounds subaltern agency in the definition of developmental challenges and in the identification of solutions and ways of getting to the solutions (Dutta & Basu, 2008).

In addition to language cooptation, Dutta (2018), also argues that subaltern communities are disenfranchised on the basis of race, class and gender and systematically excluded from participation in development discourse. This renders most of the proffered solutions to their problems impractical and ineffective. This is further expounded by Lane (2016), who distinguishes the culture centered approach as promoting process-based approaches emphasizing culture and agency rather than message-based approaches aimed at persuading communities. It is for this reason that within the culture centered approach, the role of the development communication theorist/practitioner changes from that of an expert responsible for creating social change interventions, to a co-creator together with marginalized communities. This is exemplified through the *Tsha Tsha* TV drama series where according to Makwambeni and Salawu (2018), the final product of the formative research with subaltern youth during the design phase helped to generate collective and effective solutions to problems in their communities. I believe that approaching C4D

study and practice from this CCA perspective is a more effective approach in an African setting because it privileges the lived experiences of target audiences. However, CCA has not been applied in a public health emergency context and this study will be expanding on the application of CCA in the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Ubuntu

To contextualize culture even further to the Malawian context, we need to critically analyze the concept of *Ubuntu* which is a philosophy that guides community living among the Bantu people of southern and eastern Africa. *Ubuntu* is a philosophy that has been defined in many different ways, but it essentially looks at how an individual is defined by his/her relationship to his/her community. According to Nxumalo and Mncube (2018), the term *Ubuntu* is derived from the *isiZulu* maxim “*ubuntu ngubuntu ngabanye abantu*” which according to Letseka (2012), was translated by the Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti to mean *I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am*. Others however, have argued on the inadequacy of the translation to represent the true essence of *Ubuntu* because of the connection that language has to a specific worldview (Letseka, 2012).

Some of the values that have made *Ubuntu* such a popular concept include respect, being generous to others, consensus building, and caring for each other (Geber & Keane, 2013). These are not simply good values for living, but they are also very important values for communicating, particularly in societies like Malawi which are predominantly oral. In addition to these values, Oppenheim (2012), describes how familial relations differ between the west and African communities that practice *Ubuntu*.

She describes how one's cousins in western settings are the sons and daughters of aunts and uncles, but in an *Ubuntu* set-up, these are not cousins but are one's brothers and sisters, and such differences apply to other relationships. These descriptions of relationships and values also implicitly highlight the value of language in the articulation of relationships and the rules through which these relationships operate. Assié-Lumumba (2016), highlights this very idea of language as reflecting the values and ethos of a people, thus African culture is expressed and lived through African languages.

Although *Ubuntu* is a very popular philosophical concept in South Africa, it is not necessarily a uniquely South African concept, as it is also a common idea in other countries including Malawi. According to Oppenheim (2012), *Ubuntu* is known by the *Chichewa* word *uMunthu* which she explains through a very popular proverb: *kali kokha nkanyama, tili awiri ntiwanthu*. The proverb translated into English means “being alone is like being a wild animal but being with another person makes you both human.” This proverb is understood to mean that humanity is a shared experience, and not only is it undesirable to be alone, but it is counterproductive to the isolated individual. In addition to Malawi, Oppenheim (2012) also cites other examples in the *Tswana* language of Botswana where *Ubuntu* is represented by the ideal of *Botho*. Similar examples are also found in Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda in east Africa where the concept has ideals of human generosity and harmony with one's community.

South Africa's history of apartheid which relegated the black majority to the bottom of the social ladder, depriving them of opportunity and equal participation in society is the backdrop from which the *Ubuntu* ideal was popularized in literature. Anti-

apartheid icons such as Nelson Mandela and archbishop Desmond Tutu promoted the *Ubuntu* philosophy as a unifying philosophy which directly countered the divisive apartheid system (Oppenheim, 2012). It is partly because of this history and the change to black majority rule in South Africa that the continued prominence of *Ubuntu* in public life and policy has generated serious debate and controversy. For example, Enslin and Horsthemke (2004), argue that not only is *Ubuntu* patriarchal and conservative, it is also vague and can accommodate a range of meanings and therefore it cannot be used as a guiding principle for society. Indeed the notion that *Ubuntu* does not offer practical guidance on contemporary problems in society such as wastefulness in public expenditure and other social ills is a dominant theme in Enslin and Horsthemke (2004)'s critique.

Other authors have joined in, to critique *Ubuntu*, such as Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013), who argue that “the notion of *ubuntu* has enjoyed such popular appeal that it can be said that it has become anything to anyone who so wishes to deploy it” (p. 200-201). In addition to the idea that *Ubuntu* can be anything to anyone, Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013), also make the argument that adopting *Ubuntu* is akin to a return to the past which cannot work. And they cite two reasons, one is that those who are clamoring for a return to *Ubuntu* have an elitist agenda, and the second reason is that urbanized and modern societies cannot accommodate *Ubuntu*. Another author who has also critiqued *Ubuntu* from a different perspective is Naude (2019), who worries about a narrow interpretation of *Ubuntu* which limits the benefits of *Ubuntu* to those who have power and those close to power. According to Naude (2019), a narrow interpretation of

Ubuntu can lead to abuse when those in power place limitations on who is in or out based on family, tribe or other exclusionary factors.

Some of the loudest critiques of *Ubuntu* have been on the practical aspects of the philosophy as it is reflected in contemporary South Africa, including the treatment of minorities as well as foreigners. For example, Enslin and Horsthemke (2004), argue that the presence of autocratic rule, corruption, and homophobia tempers the power of *Ubuntu* as these are contradictory to the very essence of the ideal. The highly publicized incidents of xenophobic violence against black Africans that are largely perpetrated by black South Africans, has also been cited as a weakness of the *Ubuntu* philosophy.

However, the idea that there is an inherent contradiction in the *Ubuntu* philosophy in terms of its application in South African society, does not invalidate the inherent values of the philosophy. Indeed Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013), make this observation after their critique, that the ideal of *Ubuntu* itself has no fault only that in their opinion it is not suited to the social and ethical challenges of the day. The problem is that the South African debates of *Ubuntu* are taking place in a unique context, historically as well as demographically, hence the political landscape is highly influenced by these realities. The context is different in other countries like Malawi that does not have a large white settler community that had all the political power as recently as 1994, and largely still wields much of the economic power.

Instead of focusing on the failings of the South African society to demonstrate the ideals of *Ubuntu* in their society, it is important to find ways of reflecting these values in our westernized systems of governance and communication. This is important not only

because the values of *Ubuntu* are noble, but because this is the way people are oriented socially and this is what makes sense communicatively as well. According to Nkondo (2007), *Ubuntu* has the potential to be transformative, once a clear methodology is developed and integrated into national policies, and training curricula. So, the question is not whether *Ubuntu* can be integrated into policies or not, but rather, how, that can be achieved, and this is a question that media experts and other professionals need to address. According to Nxumalo and Mncube (2018), *Ubuntu* epistemologies follow the oral tradition, using proverbs, poems, songs, and such indigenous ceremonies as rites of passage to adulthood. Therefore, the integration of *Ubuntu* into the structured rhetorical and communicative processes have to reflect this oral tradition that comes naturally to many people especially in rural areas.

Therefore, thinking about Malawian culture in the context of *Ubuntu* values, and their impact on communicative methods, as well as community organization, gives a clearer picture of what is meant when we invoke the term culture in that context. It is a communitarian system that values group ties and interdependence, although western influences are also salient especially in urban areas. I believe the spirit of *Ubuntu* is even more relevant in the context of the pandemic, where society has been upended by the virus as well as the mitigating measures that have rendered many people jobless and destitute. Media and communication initiatives need to not only reflect these values but to be founded in them to be relevant and effective especially during the pandemic when people are looking for hope. It is not enough for media to simply focus on programmatic results, while ignoring fundamental values of society.

Risk Communication

The Covid-19 pandemic which apparently originated in the Wuhan region of China towards the end of 2019 did not come as a complete surprise to the rest of the world. It had been preceded by the H1N1 outbreak in Asia, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the Zika virus outbreak in South America (Smith et al., 2014). Although the three previous outbreaks were to a large extent localized within the continents where they emerged, they all had the potential to affect the entire world. This is due to increased travel, commerce and other human exchanges that increase the opportunities for transmission (Rosenbaum, 2015). In fact, cases of both Ebola and Zika were reported in the United States even though they did not rise to become widespread outbreaks. However, many people were rightly concerned and scared that the situation would have gotten out of control (Davies & Bennett, 2016).

It is for such public health emergencies that risk communication is designed, and as outlined earlier in this document, it is a specialized genre of C4D that uses media to promote preventive actions and practices during public health emergencies and disease outbreaks. In this literature review, I will explore the definition of risk communication and what this genre of communication encompasses. Secondly, I will explore the importance of risk communication during public health emergencies or disease outbreaks. Thirdly, I will examine some of the key recommendations on how risk communication should be applied during emergencies. Fourthly, I will examine some of the critiques that have been leveled at this genre and finally, I will assess the research gaps that exist in the literature to which this study will contribute.

To begin with, although the focus of this review is predicated on risk communication as it relates to public health emergencies and disease outbreaks, authors like Glik (2007), have defined risk communication to include industrial, medical, environmental, or catastrophic risks and hazards. Glik (2007), goes further to make the distinction arguing that crisis risk communication is the specific arm of risk communication that deals with emergencies. On the other hand, authors like Sellnow and colleagues (2017) as well as Dadoo & Hugman (2012), do not make this distinction, rather they define risk communication from the angle of public health emergencies. Therefore, this review will follow the second description and discuss risk communication in relation to public health emergencies and disease outbreaks.

The definition of risk communication that was offered by Nelson and colleagues (2007), encompasses those communication efforts that aim to “to prevent, protect against, quickly respond to, and recover from emergencies” (p. S9). It is clear from this definition that risk communication comprises communication efforts at different phases of an emergency, from prevention/protection, which refers to the period before the emergency; response phase which looks at those communication actions taken during the emergency; and recovery phase which relates to the period after the emergency.

This understanding of a multi-phase approach to risk communication is supported by Figueroa (2017), who proposed four phases in risk communication practice, namely pre-crisis, initial, maintenance and resolution phases. During pre-crisis, the focus is on developing strategies and protocols and identifying resources and partnerships. During the initial phase, the focus is on dealing with confusion, increase in media interest,

rumors, and misinformation among the affected population. The maintenance phase focuses on dealing with the effects of the emergency which the affected population deal with, in their daily lives. Finally, the resolution phase focuses on risk avoidance and mitigation of the effects of the emergency situation (Figueroa, 2017).

Regarding theoretical grounding, the study and practice of risk communication has been influenced by several theories, and I will review some of the most influential theories that have shaped risk communication paradigmatically, and practically. The first theory is the protective action decision model (PADM) by Lindell and Perry (2012), which looks at how decisions are made in an emergency context especially as it relates to the pre-decision phase. The theory looks at threat perception, protective action perception and stakeholder perceptions as the key determinants of decision making at various levels (Heath et al., 2018). The theory is based on Ajzen and Fishbein' theory of reasoned action which posits that intention is the most immediate antecedent to behavior. According to Ajzen (2011), intention as a construct, encompasses attitudes towards a behavior, subjective norms towards a behavior and perceived behavior control.

The next theory that is also influential in risk communication is the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), which argues that for individuals to change their behavior, they must go through several stages which are triggered by the first encounter with information about a behavior (DiClemente et al., 1991). These stages according to DiClemente and colleagues (1991), are: precontemplation (before awareness), contemplation (after learning of an issue), preparation (weighing the benefits of action), action (implementing the recommended actions) and maintenance (sustaining the

behavior). This model is concerned with information/awareness that is specifically related to a behavior under consideration, which in the case of a disease outbreak would be related to actions or practices that enhance prevention, protection, or recovery.

The third theory that is also influential in risk communication is the extended parallel process model (EPPM) as proposed by Witte (1994), which looks at the efficacy of responses to fear messages, arguing that perceived susceptibility to risk should trigger dread which is more adaptive than fear. The model argues that fear messages should be designed in a way that they highlight the perceived threat, but to elicit motivation to act, people's efficacy should be equally highlighted to avoid a situation where fear has a debilitating effect on people's motivation to act.

The common factor in these three theoretical formulations is the singular focus on a risk and targeted behaviors which deprives them the flexibility required to deal with uncertainty which by its nature is complex and may not lend itself to control and manipulation (Matthias & Babrow, 2007). In addition to these theories, Holmstrom and colleagues (2015), also described a dual process model which posits that message content has higher potential to bring about change if the message is processed systematically. This is the cognitive mechanism that relies on deliberative, fact-based reasoning and as opposed to the affective mechanism driven by cues or heuristics as outlined in dual process theories (Chaiken, 1980); (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). These processes are both linked by the key concept of risk perception that examines how people react to a perceived risky situation. According to So and colleagues (2019), risk perception can be distinguished into societal risk perception and personal risk perception. And in line with

this study, the societal risk perception is more pertinent. This is not only because disease outbreaks tend to have society wide impacts, but also because this study will be undertaken in Malawi which is a more collectivist society.

However, a close examination of these theories reveals a close kinship with the study and practice of C4D with a significant social scientific bias in the theories and a singular focus on individual behavior change processes. Out of the three theories above (PADM, TTM and EPPM), PADM is the one that has some broader application beyond the individual as it references stakeholder perceptions among the determinants of decision making. However, PADM is based on the theory of reasoned action which operates in a similar manner to TTM and EPPM which focus on how to manipulate the behavior change processes among individuals. Clearly, risk communication theories focus on individual action. Even the dual process theories also focus on individual decision making and reaction to risky situations reflecting the overwhelming focus on individual decision making in risk communication.

As long as the risk of public health emergencies and disease outbreaks including global pandemics remain high, as exemplified by the Covid-19 outbreak, the study of risk communication also needs to be expanded and refined. This will help to effectively address the diverse needs of people in various parts of the world. The Covid-19 pandemic offers the opportunity for an examination of risk communication's capacity to address the communicative needs of communities outside of the global north. Borrowing from experiences dealing with various emergencies such as Ebola in West Africa, an

examination of the Covid-19 response in Malawi will help to strengthen the study and application of risk communication in public health emergencies.

In response to the current Covid-19 pandemic, one of the first steps taken by the government of Malawi was to initiate risk communication interventions through a health communication campaign on radio, television and social media even before the first case was diagnosed in the country (Mzumara et al., 2021). This focus on mass media and typically top-down communication is a hallmark of risk communication, as the overriding motivation is to rapidly provide critical information about the outbreak to the population. This resonates with experiences from other parts of Africa especially the Ebola outbreak in west Africa, where it is documented that the early phase of the Ebola response followed a similar top-down approach (Gillespie et al., 2016). As a result of the failures of such a top-down approach, Gillespie and colleagues (2016), offered several recommendations including community involvement and participation to improve risk communications in future emergencies. Indeed, Semujju, (2014), buttresses this point, arguing that not only is there need for a multi-media approach for communication to be effective, but there should also be a willingness and capacity for community members to participate. In addition to the issue of community participation, Figueroa (2017), recommends that risk communication should not be initiated late, as this may lead to fear, misinformation and mistrust which in the case of the Ebola outbreak in west Africa, undermined other interventions.

To emphasize the point even further, recent WHO recommendations contend that in modern times, rather than a shortage, there is an overabundance of information

particularly during the current Covid-19 outbreak, which it has termed an infodemic (WHO, 2020). As a result, the WHO (2020), recommends that interventions and messages must be based on science and evidence. This should then translate into actionable behavior change messages within the framework of infodemics. In this instance, the WHO is not challenging the fundamental basis of risk communication, but the processes through which risk communication is applied which implies a simple retooling of the approach.

However, Porat and colleagues (2020), argue that simply focusing on science as the WHO recommends is flawed on two counts: firstly, the assertion that better understanding and knowledge translates into action is not realistic; and secondly, scientific information is not infallible, but is subject to being incomplete and subject to change. An example of such changes in an evolving pandemic is the recommendation for the use of face masks during the Covid-19 pandemic. The initial recommendation related to facemasks was that only medical personnel were required to put on masks and not the general public. This recommendation was later changed to require everyone to put on masks, including the general public once the scientific basis of the recommendation was updated.

The critique against top-down approaches have been coupled with recommendations for a bottom up approach by authors such as Lowbridge and Leask (2011) as well as Dadoo and Hugman, (2012). This bottom-up approach includes embracing local ways of communication, especially performative aspects of oral traditions which include singing, dancing, and poetry. These recommended bottom-up

approaches are clearly not scientific but are normative and potent to the extent that excluding them from media approaches renders such approaches less effective.

The argument proffered by Dodoo and Hugman, (2012) is that expert driven risk communication has tended to patronize, downplay, or ignore the needs of the affected population and has led to a lack of trust and disbelief of risk messages among such populations. In line with this argument, Heath and colleagues (2018) also offer a broader perspective in terms of the challenges that risk communication needs to address. These challenges include decisions based on evidence and probabilities; institutional performance, expertise, and experience; and differences in values and worldviews. In view of the foregoing, Dodoo and Hugman, (2012), identify acceptance of uncertainty, the influence of local leaders and people's confidence in traditional remedies as being common in African communities. They add that although in some cases such remedies and approaches may contradict scientific knowledge, they are nevertheless socially salient.

The critiques of risk communication, especially the issue of a top-down approach, and slow implementation during emergencies highlight the weaknesses of current risk communication practices especially from an African perspective. Due to these weaknesses, risk communication did not work effectively as observed during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. These critiques are coupled with recommendations for a more bottom-up approach as well as a broadening of the risk communication perspectives to include accommodation of divergent values and worldviews. In addition to these recommendations, Dodoo and Hugman, (2012), recommend the integration of uncertainty

in risk communication. However this recommendation has been difficult to adopt as highlighted by Longman and colleagues (2012), because organizations are uncomfortable with communicating uncertainty as it projects an image of incompetence.

While some attempts have been made to incorporate uncertainty, it has not been systematically integrated to the point of influencing risk communication strategy, on the contrary, it has been glossed over. The recommendation to incorporate uncertainty is supported by Afifi and Weiner (2014), who argues that during the course of a disaster or outbreak, affected people experience both acute and chronic uncertainties. These uncertainties are experienced by affected populations as they anticipate a disaster, as they experience it, and as they try to recover from it. Kasperson (2014), puts it even more forcefully, that as far as risk assessment and management are concerned, uncertainties are an indispensable part of the equation. Therefore, while concerns of infection prevention and management may be the primary focus for policy makers and implementing agencies, concerns about livelihood and wellbeing are equally salient among affected communities.

Uncertainty in Public Health Emergencies

As highlighted in the previous section, uncertainty cannot be separated from public health emergencies, and should therefore not be separated from risk communication, because in times of emergencies uncertainty increases and communication is at the center of those experiences. Not only do people worry about the potential for contracting deadly diseases, but they also worry about the daily sustenance of their families and the disruption of other important services such as education for their

children, just to give an example. Uncertainty is especially high during this Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected all facets of life, particularly among the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised in society (Dutta & Elers, 2020). At country level, many African countries have handled the Covid-19 pandemic much better than expected in terms of infection and fatality rates as reflected by the WHO, but nevertheless the pandemic has also exposed the woeful weaknesses in the healthcare systems and economies. While the macro-level public health and economic challenges have been well documented, there has not been a similar attempt to capture the voice of individuals and communities in African societies to express their challenges. The media has been used primarily to advance Covid-19 prevention messaging without focusing on how those at risk are coping with the uncertainties of daily disruptions, potential loss of livelihood and essential services (Dutta & Elers, 2020).

At the center of this exploration of uncertainty is the role of communication and media, since different stakeholders are affected by, and interface through media as they look for solutions to the challenges that come about by public health emergencies such as Covid-19. According to Craig (2015), when conceived as a vehicle of shared meaning making, communication in society is responsible for creating, sustaining and transforming human interaction at the interpersonal level. In these times of Covid-19, the media is even more salient, as a trigger and vehicle of communicative processes in most countries due to Covid-19 protocols. These protocols have limited in person interactions and communication which in non-Covid-19 times are complementary to media. In agreement with the assertion by Craig, Babrow (2001), also contends that uncertainty as a

form of problematic integration (PI), is “formed, sustained and transformed by communication” (p.556), meaning that the whole experience of uncertainty from origin, through experience, to resolution is ensconced in communication.

The dominant role of communication in uncertainty is borne out by the fact that outside of psychological and clinical theorizing, most of the contemporary uncertainty theories have been in the field of communication. The leading theories in the study of uncertainty as a communicative phenomenon include: Uncertainty Management Theory (UMT) (Brashers, 2001), Theory of Motivated Information Management (TMIM) (Afifi, & Wiener, 2004), and Problematic Integration (PI) (Babrow, 1992, 2001). The three theories alluded to above share a common foundation i.e., communication, and they all highlight the centrality of communication in the causal, experiential, and resolution continuum of the uncertainty spectrum. The central thrust of UMT is that communication is central to uncertainty management. The theory argues that depending on one’s circumstances, the preferred point of resolution can be a reduction, a maintenance or an increase in uncertainty (Brashers & Hogan, 2013). TMIM on the other hand argues that the most important aspect of uncertainty is not increasing or reducing levels of uncertainty, what matters is “uncertainty discrepancy” which is the difference between the current and desired states of uncertainty (Afifi, & Weiner, 2004). Finally, PI focuses on the probability of an outcome and an evaluation of whether that outcome is positive or negative. In other words, if the probability of something happening is high, and if this outcome is evaluated negatively, then problematic integration takes place (Babrow, 2016).

According to PI theory, our assessment of the probability of an outcome is what is referred to as probabilistic orientation, while our assessment of whether the outcome is favorable or not, is referred to as evaluative orientation (Babrow, 1992). PI also posits that when problematic integration happens, several outcomes are possible, and they are referred to as forms of PI namely: uncertainty, divergence (when desire conflicts with expectations), ambivalence (desirable, mutually exclusive options), and impossibility (unattainable desires) (Babrow, 2016).

This literature review will focus on the Problematic Integration (PI) theory and specifically, uncertainty, which is a form of PI to examine how communities at risk of public health emergencies or disease outbreaks experience uncertainty communicatively. The unique feature as far as uncertainty in the context of PI is concerned, is that while the other theories focus on resolution and management of uncertainty, PI focuses on how uncertainty comes about and how people experience it (Babrow & Striley, 2014). According to PI theory, uncertainty is a complex form of problematic integration which does not lend itself well to prediction and control of variables which is the *modus operandi* for the post-positivist research tradition that dominates the study of uncertainty (Babrow & Matthias, 2009). The centrality of communication in PI aligns with the social constructivist role that communication plays in society. This is where negotiated meanings are generated through dynamic processes involving multiple players within their contextual realities. Within PI, uncertainty can be triggered and experienced based on different foci or topics that affect individuals, and these foci tend to overlap, or for different foci to connect in a process that is termed “chaining” (Babrow, 2016). The

concept of chaining is a very interesting idea in the context of risk because of the nuanced nature of idiosyncratic experiences during disease outbreaks, and the fluid, dynamic changes in foci of uncertainty for individuals, families, and communities.

As alluded to earlier, uncertainties can be classified into acute and chronic, and according to Afifi and Weiner (2004), affected communities experience both forms of uncertainties as they anticipate a disaster, as they experience it, and as they try to recover from it. This aligns with PI's idea of uncertainty foci which according to Babrow (2016), may include matters related to vulnerability to infection, family wellbeing, financial productivity, and access to treatment if infected. These are examples of foci that may trigger uncertainty, and fall into both acute and chronic uncertainties. Afifi and colleagues (2014), documented the experience of a community that experienced a category 5 tornado. They also documented how the community tried to recover from the tragic experience during a time of unprecedented destruction and loss for the community. The experience was both difficult and revealing as it manifested both acute and chronic uncertainties according to Afifi and colleagues (2014), and the experiences also demonstrated a chaining effect across different foci at different stages of the tragedy.

The challenge of incorporating uncertainty in risk communication is due to various factors. But one of the key factors is that governments and organizations in charge of communication during emergencies are themselves uncomfortable with communicating uncertainty, because it projects the image of incompetence (Longman et al., 2012). The fear that organizations have with projecting incompetence when they acknowledge uncertainty, is that community members will lose trust in the organizations.

These organizations believe that such a loss of trust will in turn negatively affect all future interactions with the communities (Poortvliet & Lokhorst, 2016). However, Thompson (2002), argues that uncertainty should be incorporated explicitly into risk communication because the ramifications of excluding it on risk management are simply unacceptable.

Having explained why uncertainty should not be excluded from risk communication, it is important to note that in PI theory the mechanisms of uncertainty are couched in communication, but the experience is not. PI theory recognizes the fact that even though uncertainty develops through communication, shared meaning making and a common understanding of the world, the way people experience it tend to be idiosyncratic even if the threat is shared (Babrow, 2016). “The goals of PI theory are to (a) illuminate an important and ubiquitous communication process, (b) enhance communication sophistication, (c) provoke alternative ways of understanding and acting, and (d) foster empathy and compassion” (Babrow & Striley, 2014, p.105). The ideal of provoking alternative ways of understanding is one of the core principles that uncertainty will contribute to the theorizing of risk communication.

By increasing the understanding of uncertainty in public health emergencies from a PI perspective, it will help to strengthen the efficacy and application of risk communication, as it will become more relevant and practical to people’s lives. The current approach of using value expectancy theories in risk communication ignores “human struggles with uncertainty, inconsistent expectations and desires, impossible dreams and painful ambivalence” (Babrow & Striley 2014, p.104). It is very important to

examine the nuanced experiences of risk through the assessment of the foci that bring about uncertainty, and the chaining effect that inevitably arise in complex public health emergencies. The narrow focus on providing infection prevention information and knowledge that risk communication focuses on, may lead to what Babrow and Matthias (2009), termed the “conundrum of knowledge begetting ignorance” (p.20). This “conundrum of knowledge begetting ignorance” simply means that information which reduces one uncertainty may induce another. The integration of uncertainty in risk communication theory and practice in a manner that is cognizant of ontological and epistemological differences will improve its relevance and effectiveness (Babrow, 2001).

Gaps in the Literature

This literature review has defined the study and practice of communication for development (C4D) and the critical role that C4D and its multiple iterations and derivations has played in behavior and social change campaigns. This literature review has also shown examples of successful implementation of behavior and social change campaigns using entertainment education (EE) which is a derivative of C4D. The literature review has also highlighted the ideological and methodological critique of C4D from the culture centered approach (CCA). This CCA perspective advocates for greater agency by audiences, stronger cultural integration, and ability of marginalized audiences to resist structural barriers to communication and service delivery. However, the application of the culture centered approach in an emergency context is missing in the literature and this study will extend the application of agency, culture, and structure in a public health emergency context in Malawi.

In addition to C4D, this study also explored the study and practice of risk communication focusing on the most influential theories as well as how risk communication has been applied, in Malawi. This literature review has shown that risk communication as it is currently constituted privileges a social scientific approach with a focus on individual action and behavior change. The literature review also highlighted the fact that in addition to focusing on individual behavior change, risk communication is also a predominantly top-down approach which privileges expert driven solutions over local resources. Some of the recommended actions in the literature are that risk communication needs to adopt a bottom-up approach, and that it also needs to incorporate uncertainty to better respond to people's needs during public health emergencies. This study will extend the study and practice of risk communication by incorporating uncertainty as defined by the problematic integration theory (PI).

Finally, this literature review also looked at the concept of uncertainty which is a very important concept in times of public health emergencies where people experience fear, anxiety and deprivations that affect normal living. This literature review has established that uncertainty has been extensively studied in health care as well as in communication and several theories have been developed to explore this concept. For purposes of this study, I chose the problematic integration theory (PI) to explore the concept further. Previous applications of PI have focused on how uncertainty is experienced communicatively. According to PI, uncertainty is triggered by specific issues or foci, and a particularly interesting phenomenon called chaining can happen when multiple foci trigger uncertainty concurrently or simultaneously. This study will extend

the study and application of uncertainty by applying the concept beyond the individual level to a community context. In addition, the study will also examine the foci for uncertainty in public health emergencies in Malawi and how the chaining effect impacts communicative needs among community members.

Research Questions

This study will focus on addressing the question of participation of audiences in risk communication in view of the emphasis on agency, culture, and structure by CCA, as well as the nature of emergencies that justify top-down approaches. The use of CCA as a lens through which risk communication is implemented will highlight shortfalls that exist with the current approach. In addition to addressing the top-down critique of risk communication, this study will also explore uncertainty in risk communication practice. Therefore, this study will provide new insights and a novel approach to risk communication through uncertainty as defined in PI theory, including the concept of chaining of foci. Finally, this study will address the following research questions to explore the bottom-up participatory approach and integrating uncertainty including the chaining of foci:

RQ1. How do communication and media audiences participate in the design and implementation of risk communication in view of Covid-19 restrictions?

RQ2. How does integrating uncertainty into risk communication improve the relevance of risk communication among local communities and audiences?

RQ3. How does the chaining of uncertainty foci affect the design and implementation of risk communication?

Filling the Gaps in the Literature

In the previous section, three major gaps in risk communication literature were identified, and these gaps are what informed the development of the research questions for this study and consequently the data collection tools. The three gaps were: firstly, the limited or tokenistic participation by target audiences especially in the formulation of media and communication campaigns in public health emergencies. Secondly, the absence of uncertainty in risk communication literature to account for other contextual factors during a pandemic. And finally, the concept of uncertainty as defined in the problematic integration theory, has been applied to an individual context but has not been applied to a community context in an African setting.

The question of limited or tokenistic participation is addressed theoretically by the culture centered approach which promotes the agency of audiences, the preeminence of culture in communication and the deconstruction of structural barriers to communication (M. J. Dutta, 2016). Therefore, the questions that had to be answered to address this issue of limited participation included the following: (a) to what extent were target audiences engaged in the design and implementation of media and communication campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic; (b) did cultural considerations form any part of the media and communication campaigns during the pandemic; and finally (c) how did the selection of media and communication channels affect access to critical information by the target audiences?

The second gap is the absence of uncertainty as a key component of risk communication, both in the way that communicators handle uncertainty in their

communication, as well as the ways in which audiences deal with uncertainty communicatively. According to Longman and colleagues (2012), the main reason that governments and organizations in charge of media and communication are uncomfortable with communicating uncertainty is that it projects the image of incompetence. Some of the key questions are: how has the Covid-19 pandemic affected people's lives and their livelihoods? Secondly, how have these pandemic related impacts affected their communicative priorities? And finally, how have these effects been addressed in media and communication campaigns?

The literature review has also shown that risk communication as it is currently constituted privileges a social scientific approach with a focus on individual action and behavior change. In addition, the literature review also highlighted the fact that in addition to focusing on individual behavior change, risk communication is also a predominantly top-down approach which privileges expert driven solutions over local resources. This study will examine the theoretical and practical applications of incorporating uncertainty in risk communication as defined by the problematic integration theory (PI). Like uncertainty, the application of the culture centered approach in an emergency context is also missing in literature and this study will extend the application of agency, culture, and structure in a public health emergency context in Malawi.

Finally, according to PI, uncertainty is triggered by specific issues or foci, and a particularly interesting phenomenon called chaining can occur when multiple foci trigger uncertainty concurrently or simultaneously. While this study will extend the study and

application of uncertainty by applying the concept beyond the individual level to a community context. It will also examine the foci for uncertainty during the pandemic in Malawi and how the chaining effect impacts communicative needs among the population.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This study was approved by the Ohio University institutional review board (IRB) and was issued IRB number 21-E-167. And in order to address the research questions highlighted above, I travelled to Lilongwe Malawi in late November 2021, to collect data from men and women over the age of 18 living in the capital city Lilongwe and its suburbs. I sought informed verbal consent from the participants before engaging in any consultations with them to clearly identify myself, the purpose of my study and the fact that their participation in the study was voluntary. I followed methodological guidance provided by the two key theories in this study, namely: the culture centered approach (CCA) and the problematic integration (PI) theories. CCA was used to guide in the development of data collection tools to address the issues of agency, culture, and structure in C4D in an emergency setting in Malawi. On the other hand, PI insights contributed to addressing a bottom-up approach and how to integrate uncertainty into risk communication within the data collection tools. The two theories outlined above provided the methodological guidance required to effectively implement this study in terms of whether followed a qualitative or quantitative approach. According to Dutta and Basu (2008), CCA is based on grounded theory and methodologically it privileges a bottom-up approach in data collection. This approach allows respondents to articulate their lived experiences and co-construct meanings as they participate in the inquiry.

A similar argument is made in PI theory, that uncertainty is a complex form of PI which does not lend itself to prediction and control of variables (Babrow & Matthias, 2009). In response to the assertion by Dutta and Basu (2008) above, and Corbin and

Strauss (1990), the data collection tools for this study were designed following the grounded theory tradition. This tradition utilizes methods such as interviews, observations, and review of documents, video, and other published sources. This study also in part reflects some of the grounded theory ethos as outlined by Charmaz (2015), that grounded theory studies should begin with data collection with a focus on learning people's reactions to their situation, sensemaking and action. Therefore, based on this methodological guidance, this study adopted qualitative methods for recruiting respondents, collecting, and analyzing data to address the research questions above.

The guidance provided by the CCA and PI theories are reflective of the gaps that have been identified in the literature review section of this study. The first gap that was identified was related to the fact that the culture centered approach has been applied in a development context, but the application of CCA in a public health emergency context is missing. Therefore, as indicated in the first paragraph of this section, CCA is based on grounded theory and therefore collection of data must follow a narrative approach which is in the grounded theory tradition. Because of this, addressing this gap required using data collection tools and analytical tools that reflect the bottom-up approach of grounded theory practices.

The second gap that was identified, the focus on a top-down approach in risk communication, whose remedy is a bottom-up approach. In view of this gap, this study focused more on narratives from media and communication audiences that provide in-depth views of their contexts, experiences, interactions, and expectations. Such narratives

provided an insight into the nature of risk communication in Malawi, which follows a similar pattern to risk communication in other parts of the world, the top-down approach.

The third gap was the absence of uncertainty in risk communication, which in similar fashion to CCA, privileges narratives as people articulate their experiences. As highlighted earlier, uncertainty in the problematic integration approach does not follow post-positivist methodologies. It is for this reason that this study opted for a narrative approach to data collection and adapted grounded theory methodologies to reflect the nuanced nature of uncertainty in emergencies.

Data Collection

Since this study uses qualitative methods, and is inspired by grounded theory, the main method of data collection was semi-structured in-depth interviews with key informants at community level as well as C4D and risk communication experts. In line with CCA literature, an open-ended in-depth questionnaire was administered to participants to elicit their views of communication and media during public health emergencies. This also provided them the space to reflect on uncertainty, participation, agency and culture (Basnyat & Dutta, 2012; Dutta, 2012; Dutta & Basu, 2008; Sastry, 2016). According to Dutta (2006), the following has to be met to satisfy CCA criteria: (a) engagement of culture in local contexts; (b) addressing structural issues; (c) creating space for people to exercise agency and (d) resistance to dominant structures. I complemented the in-depth interviews with observations that provided additional data to contextualize the conversations and dialogues. Through observation, nonverbal cues and

other observable dynamics that are not vocalized by conscious choice or subconsciously added to the richness of the data.

There were four discussion guides in total, the first one being for men and women respondents as part of the audience; the second guide was for government, NGOs, and the UN; the third one was for the media and last one was for community leaders. These discussion guides were drafted in English and translated into Chichewa, representing the two official languages in the country. Consequently, in administering these interview guide questionnaires, respondents were given the opportunity to choose whether to have the interview in English or in Chichewa.

I undertook seventeen semi-structured in-depth interviews in total, in person, out of which five were with women above the age of eighteen, and another five were with men above the age of eighteen. An additional two interviews were with local community leaders, one with a representative from an NGO, and yet another one was with a representative from a UN agency, namely UNICEF. An additional interview was also held with a representative from a media house and the final two interviews were with government officials responsible for communication at national level and for Lilongwe district. These interviews were designed to take approximately 30 to 45 minutes, but with flexibility to allow respondents to exhaust their responses without curtailing them. All of these interviews were undertaken within the city of Lilongwe and its suburbs at the convenience of the interviewees, ensuring that they chose a public place where they were comfortable to have the interview. In addition to the choice of place, the interviews were also done during daytime, unless under extenuating circumstances, but always had the

convenience and safety of the participants in mind. Strict adherence to Covid-19 protocols were also observed during the interviews including the wearing of masks (which I provided to the respondents) and observing social distancing, sitting six feet from the participants.

The interviews were preceded by sampling and recruitment of participants to the study, but in some cases these processes went side by side. The participants were sampled using the snowball sampling method which was initiated from my existing contacts in Lilongwe, Malawi. In line with Covid-19 guidelines, I shared a one-page brief description of the study, including the benefits for participation and my contact details with my initial contacts, who then shared with other potential participants, so that those willing to participate then contacted me. According to Naderifar and colleagues (2017), the snowball sampling is in the category of convenience sampling methods and provides a researcher with the opportunity to utilize his/her contacts and is by its nature non-representative. Therefore, based on contacts with potential respondents, I set up appointments considering their convenience and in observance of Covid-19 restrictions that were in force at the time. All interviewees were 18 years or older, with a general level of awareness of local Covid-19 guidelines and current discussions surrounding the issue. In the case of community leaders, they had to be influential, be aware of local Covid-19 guidelines and have an opinion on the guidelines and their effect on their communities. Representatives from the government, the UN, NGOs, and media houses were those who were directly involved in development of Covid-19 communication strategies or media productions, and other relevant communication materials.

Respondents were made aware of their right to refuse participation in the study or to end the interview at any point if they became uncomfortable with the interview in any way, in line with IRB protocols.

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical and methodological guidance, as the researcher, I was an important tool in the data collection and analysis process. The biggest advantage I had was that I was conducting this study in my home country of Malawi where I understood the culture and spoke the local language. To be specific, I conducted this study in the capital city of Lilongwe where I spent over 10 years working in social marketing and communication for development. In addition, I also conducted the study in Chichewa and English, both of which are widely spoken languages nationwide and are officially recognized as national languages for all manner of transactions. I am obviously fluent in both languages, with Chichewa being my mother tongue, and the language that is spoken in Lilongwe city and in most parts of the country.

Another advantage I had was that I had cultivated so many contacts in Malawi from my work with Population Services International (PSI) and UNICEF. These contacts are in government, civil society, media, and religious institutions that gave me an advantage in line with my sampling methodology. As alluded to earlier, I conducted interviews with representatives from government and non-governmental bodies that are in the frontline of media and communication strategy and implementation. These interviews were complementary to the interviews that I undertook with audience members as well as local community leaders who provided the media and communication perspective from their local experiences and understanding of Covid-19.

Although I was born in Malawi and grew up in the country, my experiences of getting an advanced education and living in other cultures have given me another perspective on life, and that is looking at life in Malawi as an outsider. Therefore, in as much as I am a Malawian, and I have a good understanding of the culture and the people, I was also an outsider in many respects. This insider/outsider status affords me some benefits as a researcher according to Kydd-Williams (2019), who advises that a researcher should acknowledge their outsider status as much their insider status. I am mindful that as an insider I have an intimate understanding of how the country is structured administratively and communicatively. But I also needed to critically look at these structures with my outsider's lens to learn how these structures facilitate or inhibit communicative processes. I maintained a keen observation posture throughout my interactions to validate some responses in order to mitigate any gaps in the dialogues.

Another point worth highlighting is the fact that the capital city of Lilongwe, where this study took place, is like the proverbial melting pot of Malawian society where multiple ethnicities and tribal groupings live and therefore is a microcosm of the country in many ways. In addition to representing multiple cultures and languages, Lilongwe also has a vibrant media landscape which includes public and private FM radio stations, public and private television stations, community, and religious radios and a vibrant social media scene. Radio and television are complemented by social media and other forms of internet-based communications which have also seen a significant increase over the years (Namasinga Selnes & Orgeret, 2020).

In addition, I was also mindful of my personal and social traits, and values that may influence this study, which necessitated consciousness of my positionality as I tried to make sense of the interactions and narratives that developed during fieldwork. Starting with my status as a heterosexual man, I believe that in a patriarchal society like Malawi, I had some advantages of access and power like in many heteronormative societies. This meant that I needed to be mindful of subtleties related to how people communicate with each other, power, and gender dynamics especially how they affect communication in group settings. In addition to this, my status as a scholar at a US university afforded me easy access to relevant institutions such as NGOs, media houses and academia. However, this status may not have been such an asset among local people who may have had financial expectations based on their participation in the study. In order to mitigate potential social and communicative complexities especially when dealing with female respondents, I recruited a male and female research assistant to help with logistical and social functions.

To better understand how I became interested in studying the pandemic, it is important to appreciate my professional journey as a learner, a practitioner, and a scholar. Having gone to primary and secondary school during the days of the Kamuzu Banda dictatorship in Malawi, I became interested in social sciences. This was not because I understood what the term meant, but because I knew that I did not want to become an accountant, a medical doctor, or an engineer. I therefore ended up studying public health for my bachelor's degree, which introduced me to the social aspects of disease and by extension, prevention of disease. This was followed by a career in social marketing, with

a focus on HIV prevention and malaria prevention. During this phase of my career, I learnt about the power of persuasion and behavior change, specifically how public health results can be achieved using commercial marketing principles and tools. Through a combination of intense targeted mass communication, branding, and marketing events, I learnt how to convince people to adopt certain behaviors such as consistent condom use.

After working with NGOs, the next phase of my career was in communication for development with the United Nations. During this phase of my career, I learnt more about working with the public sector to improve service delivery, and it was at this point that I was introduced to emergency communication. Malawi has over the years had to deal with various disease outbreaks which usually coincide with the onset of the rainy season or natural disasters such as flooding or droughts. Diseases such as cholera, measles, and diarrhea are some of the most common outbreaks that happen in different parts of the country. I was therefore involved in creating media and communication strategies for dealing with such outbreaks, as well as natural disasters that have become very common in recent times. In doing this work, I always had questions about the sufficiency, effectiveness, and relevance of our approaches, even though they were based on evidence and social scientific theory.

I remember visiting communities that were dealing with natural disasters and disease outbreaks, only to be asked questions about food, and loss of property as well as livestock. The typical answer that we would provide went along these lines “we are not here to deal with issues of food, we are here to talk about disease prevention, another team will come to talk about food.” This was not based on any joint planning with the

team dealing with food, it was simply a way to avoid that conversation because we did not have any answers. These questions have always bothered me, and I have always asked myself whether what we were doing was relevant to the people we were trying to help or not. Were we just driven by our reporting obligations or were we responding to the needs of the people. Of course, this extends to media and communication, and the absence of a real bottom-up approach which we understood rhetorically but never really applied in the true sense of the word. So, the declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic provided the platform for me to attempt to answer some of the questions that I have had over the years through the literature that I have been exposed to in my studies.

Data Analysis

The analysis started during, and continued after data collection, and the first step was to transcribe verbatim all interviews which were recorded using my Samsung smartphone after obtaining consent from respondents. After transcribing the interviews, I proceeded to read the transcripts and highlight sections of narratives that appeared significant based on unique perspectives, critical views, unexpected information, and other such cues. After highlighting sections of the transcripts, I re-read the highlighted sections and applied open coding, trying to capture the essence of the significant portions with phrases or key words. I applied open coding which according to Corbin and Strauss (1990), affords the researcher the ability to compare events/actions/interactions to see if there are commonalities within the text or if there are differences in the personal narratives. This allows for concept labelling and grouping of phenomena that share similarities to be able to categorize and create sub-categories as they are emerging from

the text during analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This open coding helps to crystallize meanings based on the narratives by respondents during the data collection process.

Charmaz (2015) recommends writing memos from the moment the first piece of data is collected where the researcher reflects on the data, analyzes the codes, compares data, and identifies gaps for further data collection. Following up on open coding, I then applied axial coding which helped to link related categories and subcategories based on the conditions, context, strategies, and consequences. This stage, according to Charmaz (2015), involves theoretical sampling, exhausting all relevant codes followed by code sorting which facilitates theoretical reconstruction, and this finally helps in writing.

Following axial coding, I then applied selective coding which according to Corbin and Strauss (1990), helps a researcher to unify all categories under the core category and provides details for other categories accordingly. Selective coding was undertaken towards the end of the study and in line with Corbin and Strauss (1990), where the core category is also the main analytic idea of the study. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990) the core category is identified when a researcher asks the following questions:

“What is the main analytic idea presented in this research? If my findings are to be conceptualized in a few sentences, what do I say? What does all the action/interaction seem to be about? How can I explain the variation that I see between and among the categories?” (p. 14).

This was followed by interpretation of the data for which Lindloff and Taylor (2011), recommend using conceptual devices to trope in qualitative research as follows: metaphoric, metonymic, ironic, syntagmatic, and pragmatic. These conceptual devices

help the researcher to achieve different aspects with the data such as providing a figurative frame of reference (metaphoric); isolating parts that will be taken as emblematic representation of the whole (metonymic); expressions that invert the meaning of other expressions (ironic); exploring activities that follow a scripted pattern (syntagmatic) and contrasting elements of a cultural domain (paradigmatic).

Regarding evaluating the interpretations, this study focused on validity rather than reliability owing to the qualitative nature of the study. The study also incorporated crystallization to allow for creativity in making claims about the different media and communication phenomena according to Lindloff and Taylor (2011).

Table 1: Research Schedule

ACTIVITY	TIMELINES	EXPECTED OUTPUT	RESPONSIBLE
Revise and Finalize proposal and present to committee for approval	September 2021	Research proposal approved with recommended changes in readiness for submission to IRB	Researcher supported by Academic Advisor
Submit proposal to IRB committee for approval	September 2021	Research proposal approved by IRB committee in readiness for field work	Researcher supported by academic advisor

Start field work	November 2021	Travel to Malawi to collect data	Researcher
Field work	December 2021	Data collected in line with approved research protocol	Researcher
First draft report	August 2022	Draft report submitted to committee for feedback	Researcher supported by Academic advisor
Revising report	September 2022	Report revised based on feedback from committee	Researcher supported by Academic advisor
Final report	September 2022	Defend dissertation	Researcher

Field Research Experience

Data collection for this study was delayed by a semester as the initial plan had been to travel to Kampala, Uganda in the summer of 2021 to collect data. During that period, there had been a reduction in Covid-19 cases and restrictions on movement had been relaxed by the Ugandan government. Unfortunately, the trip coincided with an upsurge in cases in Uganda and a decision was made to cancel the trip because the government of Uganda instituted a 45-day lockdown just a week before my scheduled departure. As a result of the cancellation, a change in the plans became necessary because

my prior experience with lockdowns in Uganda made me believe that such actions were likely to be repeated in the event of cases spiking again.

As a result of this change, I requested the committee to change my study location from Kampala, Uganda, to Lilongwe, Malawi a change that had several advantages. The first advantage was that Malawi was an easier social landscape for me to navigate owing to the fact that it is my home country and I have stronger social and professional connections. Even though I also had the advantage of having lived and worked in Uganda for close to a year, Malawi was still an easier landscape for me to navigate. The second advantage that Malawi had as a research site was that the government in Malawi had not instituted successfully a countrywide Covid-19 lockdown for the entire duration of the pandemic. Therefore, I felt confident that the chances of such a lockdown being implemented during data collection exercise were minimal. However, even with these clear advantages in mind, conducting research during pandemic conditions was bound to be challenging anyway, and that proved to be the case.

While I had foreseen some of the challenges related to conducting research in a pandemic, and I had taken relevant mitigation measures to manage those challenges, there were other challenges that were unforeseen. And these challenges posed new obstacles to the implementation of the study. The first challenge for which I had prepared a mitigation measure, was the use of private transportation in the event of disruptions to public transportation in Malawi. The second mitigation measure that I planned for, was to conduct my interviews in open public spaces except where it was inconvenient for my

respondents. I also prepared to provide face masks and hand sanitizers to all my respondents.

On the other hand, the unforeseen challenge came in the form of the discovery of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus, which was announced the day I landed in Johannesburg, South Africa, in transit to Malawi. As a direct consequence of the discovery of the Omicron variant, the United States government announced travel restrictions on seven southern African countries including Malawi and South Africa. And this had a direct impact on me, as I transited through South Africa and collected data in Malawi, which posed a risk that I may not be allowed to come back to the United States because I spent time in both Malawi and South Africa.

Field Observations

There were several notable observations that I made during this study which are significant to understand the findings of this study. The first observation was that all but two of my respondents chose to have their interviews in English and not the local language Chichewa. This language choice can be seen in two perspectives, the first being the perception that as a US based researcher I may have a bias towards the use of the English language or indeed that speaking English is a sign of being learned and sophisticated. And while this language choice may be seen as a personal choice, it is also driven in part by national policy that designates English as the language for doing business. Indeed, this could also be seen as a legacy of colonial value systems that valorize European languages (Ndhlovu, 2017). The second perspective is that this trend could be attributed to the snowball sampling effects, which according to Warren (2002),

asks a person who meets the theoretical criteria to locate others through their networks. So, the fact that my initial contacts were mostly people with a higher than high school education, it is very likely that those in their networks would have similar traits and thus be more at ease having conversations in English than in Chichewa.

The second observation was that conducting interviews in open public spaces was safe as far as the Covid-19 guidelines were concerned as it was easy to observe social distancing, but also posed a challenge when it came to recording conversations using my smartphone. Windy conditions and ambient noise were particularly challenging, which forced us to be louder than usual in a public space, but that was the only way to overcome the noise. However, the advantage in these locations, which were mostly restaurants and cafes, was that it was safe and easy to access using public transportation. In addition, it was very convenient to buy snacks and drinks for the participants, which was part of the plan for the interviews.

The third observation was that having a female research assistant was very important during interviews with female respondents. Some of the participants were nervous at the beginning of interviews but having a fellow woman as part of the conversation helped to encourage them to relax and open up to share their experiences in depth. Additionally, since the discussions were held in public places, it is less likely for a group of two women and one man to be socially misinterpreted than if it was just one man and one woman. This helped to preserve the dignity of the interviewees in a socially conservative society like Malawi, where rumors can destroy people image and standing in society.

The final observation was the willingness by participants to take part in this study and their openness to participate. It was a pleasant surprise that I encountered very few cancellations from my participants and for the most part it was due to serious personal issues including the loss of a loved one. I believe that such willingness to participate in the study could be attributed to the connections that I and my research assistants had with the respondents, as well as *ubuntu*, which is the organizing principle behind the famed African hospitality. While the effect of my team's connection with the respondents, including the connections among the respondents themselves, is a straightforward idea that would explain their willingness to participate. The effects of *ubuntu* on the other hand have been discussed in the literature review section and will be discussed further in the latter sections of this document. As highlighted earlier, the *Ubuntu* paradigm is a community organizing concept that defines one's place in society in relation to other people, and how one is defined by those relationships, including the moral aspects of community life (Geber & Keane, 2013). *Ubuntu* prescribes such values as respect, generosity, consensus, and mutual care. I believe that the *ubuntu* values are central to the experiences that I had in the field, especially when it came to people's willingness to participate in this study.

Chapter 4: Study Findings

Introduction

In assessing the effectiveness of communication and media initiatives during the Covid19 pandemic in Malawi, this study focused on the principal critique of risk communication, which is that it is an expert driven top-down approach. This approach is characterized by limited participation among target audiences. The other key aspect in assessing the effectiveness of pandemic era risk communication in this study was to examine the absence of uncertainty in risk communication practice. This assessment of uncertainty also focused on understanding some of the key foci that trigger uncertainty and the “chaining effect” that develops as different foci are triggered. Such chaining can happen when different foci trigger uncertainty simultaneously or concurrently which may influence how targeted media audiences experience public health emergencies communicatively.

Guided by the culture centered approach theory (CCA), this study looked at aspects of audience participation as articulated by audience members and media experts to zero in on the three central concepts of CCA, namely; culture, agency and structure (M. J. Dutta, 2016). This guidance is in the form of a lens through which the practice of risk communication in Malawi can be assessed on the basis of the CCA concepts, and not necessarily that this study is designed as a CCA study. The concept of culture looks at the centrality of contextual factors in media and communication initiatives. This is especially

true in the global south where media and communication initiatives are founded on western scientific logics and driven by neoliberal ideologies. While this is the case, the target audiences for much of the media and communication initiatives live in societies whose culture and values are different from those of western societies. This means that such communities must navigate multiple cultural influences as they engage with media. The second construct in CCA, agency, looks at the capacity of target audiences to shape their own narratives and to carve their own communicative spaces in the context of their culture. CCA contends that communities in the global south understand their challenges and problems better than any outsiders and can articulate the challenges and effective solutions. Finally, the third construct in CCA, structure, focuses on how target audiences communicatively enact their agency within the context of their culture. This construct, called structure, focuses on those barriers, inefficiencies, and corruption that negatively affect service provision, such as health care because of neoliberal policies that disadvantage poor people.

On the other hand, uncertainty is viewed from the perspective of the Problematic Integration theory (PI) which according to Babrow (2001), posits that uncertainty as a form of problematic integration (PI), is “formed, sustained and transformed by communication” (p.556). The centrality of communication in the experience of uncertainty is a unique idea that should be well understood because it can make a difference on outcomes and experiences that people have in a pandemic. It is for this reason that uncertainty is concerned not only with the pandemic, but other contextual factors that are salient in a public health emergency including the current Covid19

pandemic. Such contextual factors affect the communicative dynamics among media audiences, and thus also affect the way people experience and deal with uncertainty.

While the trigger for uncertainty may be a pandemic or other emergency, the experience and outcomes may have far reaching consequences on health and social outcomes as will be highlighted in this chapter. That is why uncertainty should be a central feature in the design, implementation and evaluation of communication and media strategies and initiatives during public health emergencies.

In this section I am going to present some of the key findings from this study that will highlight the media and communication approaches that are working well and those that are not, guided by the theoretical approaches highlighted above. I will also explore some of the key themes that emerged during the interviews, while providing some context that will situate the findings in line with current literature. The key findings have been organized thematically, based on the responses to the interview questions, and therefore I will not endeavor to make any theoretical or practical arguments in this chapter. However, a thorough discussion of the implications of these findings, their theoretical relevance and their contributions to current risk communication literature will be discussed in the next chapter.

Media Use and the Pandemic

Most respondents, at least eleven out of the 17 respondents, indicated that their preferred media was social media platforms and more specifically Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter complemented with traditional media such as Television and radio. However, their reasons for choosing these platforms were different, with the traditional media being

seen as more reliable than social media even though they also claimed to get information about the pandemic from social media. One female respondent claimed that social media is a more practical medium saying:

“To me Facebook and Instagram, I feel like they are so practical, yeah to me, people are posting things on Facebook and Instagram. I am thinking of social media because usually nowadays everyone is on social media, a day cannot go by without being on social media.”

This point was supported by a male respondent who put it this way:

“My favorite source of information is social media, for instance, some people cannot afford to buy a newspaper due to their financial situation, but if someone is on social media, they can get the information even though they have limited data (credit for internet access) but still they can get the information easily and in the fastest way.”

It should be noted that these conversations took place in Malawi’s capital city, Lilongwe where access to social media is higher than in other parts of the country. In this country of about 19.4 million people, only an estimated 18% of the population has access to the internet and most of them are in urban centers (Kemp, 2021). However, according to Kemp (2021), the number of internet users is growing rapidly, with an increase of 639 thousand users between 2020 and 2021. If access to the internet continues to grow in line with the trend seen between 2020 and 2021, social media will also grow and become a more significant source of information than it is at the moment.

The preference for social media that has been expressed by respondents to this study, comes with a cautionary tale about the potential pitfalls that information from social media platforms may pose. It seems that while the respondents are happy to use social media because of some advantages that they see over media platforms including cost, convenience, an immediacy, they also feel the need to have information from social

media sources verified. Here is what another female respondent had to say about the reliability of social media,

“I would rather hear it from local news than hearing it from social media like WhatsApp or Facebook because anybody can post anything, you can post according to your view, so I would rather hear it from an official place. So, despite (the fact that we can) ask questions from social media or through other sources, I would rather trust what the authorities say than hearing it from other people who are simply speculating.”

This distrust of the veracity of social media information also reflects the limited efforts that communicators have invested in social media platforms to share information about the pandemic. Consider this response from the government respondent on the question of what they have done on social media,

“social media not quite, apart from WhatsApp, where we have created WhatsApp groups with faith leaders where we share materials, where we even share soft copies of posters like the one you are seeing here (he said pointing to a poster on the wall), we share them on the WhatsApp groups because our audience are coming from the rural areas so they don't have access to either Facebook or other social media platforms.”

There is a clear disconnect between how much target audiences utilize social media to the levels of investment in social media for systematic engagement with target audiences by government media experts and other stakeholders. As an example of the ambiguity around social media, here is a snapshot by the UN respondent explaining the role of social media as part of the media mix that they utilize to communicate about the pandemic; *“of course there have also been a lot of interventions around social media looking at urban young people in general, looking at how we can utilize this space of social media.”* This response lacks specifics which would signify limited focus on social

media because this respondent is a media and communication expert, who would not only know the strategy but also responsible for creating it.

Clearly, the focus on traditional media to communicate about the pandemic is a sensible approach, but the growth of internet access and social media should necessitate a rethink of the strategy especially in urban areas. The use of social media as part of a comprehensive media package should therefore be strengthened especially during the Covid-19 pandemic where instances of misinformation and conspiracy theories are rampant.

“It is Difficult for Us to Get the Information”

The current pandemic situation has posed something of a paradox to communication and media planners. This is the case because of the conflict between the culturally preferred interpersonal means of communication and the restrictions placed on gatherings as part of Covid-19 prevention protocols. The inability of communicators and health personnel to convene gatherings in communities to address questions and to clarify prevention guidelines was brought up several times as a reason why some people had not decided to get vaccinated. This stance on vaccination is evident from responses by some respondents. These respondents attributed people’s unwillingness to get vaccinated to the simple fact that they have questions for which they need answers before they can make the decision to get vaccinated. For example, one of the female respondents put it this way:

“I want to know the effective(ness) of the vaccine, there are 3 types, and I don't know how they differ, I want first to understand the difference between the vaccines then I can go for it, maybe I should know which one is the best.”

This sentiment was echoed by the media respondent who had this to say when asked about the audience response to their messages on the pandemic broadcast through radio:

“Government has not come to us to really explain more about these vaccines and how they work. You listen to the minister of information saying you need to get vaccinated on radio, but we expected health experts to come to our homes and explain to us what these vaccines are, how they work, and what happens when you see these reactions (to the vaccine)”

The issue of vaccine hesitancy and the need for interactive face to face communication highlights a preference for the traditional way of communication in most Malawian communities. During such interactions community leaders typically take advantage of open-air gatherings to engage their communities in dialogue on important issues that affect their communities. This traditional approach to communication was well articulated by another female respondent who said, *“our leaders such as members of parliament, or counselors take advantage of community gatherings including funerals where they explain to the community members of new developments including this pandemic and how people can protect themselves, such as wearing masks.”* It has to be said that it is not only political leaders who are responsible for such communications, traditional and religious leaders also play a key role in such initiatives. In some cases, a traditional leader may actually feel that their role is not just limited to engaging in dialogue with their community members as highlighted in this conversation that my media respondent had with a traditional leader who phoned in to one of their radio programs on Covid-19. Here is what the traditional leader said according to the media respondent:

“I think like we have put culture away, because back in Kamuzu days (the first president of independent Malawi) the ministry of health, the government would consult chiefs to tell them that we want to do vaccinations, kaya amati kuli nthomba kaya chani (whether it was smallpox or some other disease) so they used to tell us as chiefs what we needed to do and we used to sit down with the people and tell them, (and) if they have got any questions we could invite health experts, but now that is not happening, everybody is doing whatever they know, which is something that is making the whole thing to be complicated.”

This preference for in-person interaction is not just a cultural preference but the most practical option especially in rural areas where access to other media platforms is limited and health education for the general public is not provided. The health sector in Malawi is oriented towards providing curative services with preventive and extension services mostly limited to maternal and child health. In a country where only 18% of the population live in urban areas according to Kemp (2021), access to information among the rural inhabitants even through traditional media is a challenge. This point is illustrated by one respondent who on the question of access to media recounted an experience she had on a visit to her home village:

“I went to Nkhatabay (a district in northern Malawi, on the shores of lake Malawi) in February, and I remember we were all putting on masks (I and my family that is), so when we got there, I remember that half the things we know people don't know. So, we had to help out with other things like sanitizing and how to handle other things, like washing hands frequently, being clean.”

It is clear from this description of the visit that although statistics show that radio ownership is almost ubiquitous, access to information in rural areas is not. And there are several factors that could account for this dynamic including frequency of messaging, timing of broadcasts, household power dynamics, ability to buy batteries to power radios and other factors. This is why in-person communication is very important, especially in rural areas, but people are frustrated by the setup of health services which fail to meet the

need for communication. For example, on the issue of getting information from health facilities, another respondent had this to say:

“It is difficult for us to get the information, because we can't go to the hospital maybe we will have some congestions (hospitals are usually full of people), they (health personnel) cannot attend to someone who wants to know about covid19 and someone who wants to be treated, so they will value someone who wants to be treated and you cannot be helped in a good way. So, they better come and mobilize people in our communities and help us so that we should ask any question that will help us.”

However, while communicators are aware of this need, the practicality of such interactions in the face of pandemic restrictions is challenging. This is not only due to the government guidelines on public gatherings but also internal restrictions from the other key stakeholders such as the UN. The impact of travel restrictions was articulated well by the UN respondent who said, *“now with Covid we are also restricted, we cannot move, so we are all sitting in an office, but we want know what people are saying, we want to engage, we want to know what people are saying.”* It is not just the need for feedback that worries communicators, it is also the inability to engage with target audiences, to learn lessons, and to provide answers to pertinent questions. As a result, there is a feeling that the absence of such forums creates fertile ground for conspiracy theories and misinformation to thrive. According to the media respondent to this study, simple messages promoting the vaccine were not enough:

“I think that because there wasn't enough civic education done about the vaccines, it was more to do with “ah get vaccinated, this vaccine is just like any other vaccine” and then you have got all these misconceptions where people were like it's connected to 666 (the biblical mark of the beast found in the book of revelation). Therefore, for all those people that are going to be vaccinated, there is a liquid that is inside your body, and they will be able to detect so many things.”

It would make more sense for such a novel, complex, and stressful phenomena such as the Covid-19 pandemic, to require a more nuanced, comprehensive and context specific media and communication strategy. Such a strategy would help to deal with the myriad of issues that are directly and indirectly related to the pandemic, in a population where the lives of people are already fragile in normal times but have been made worse by the pandemic.

“They Think it is the Mark of the Beast”

The issue of the vaccination being equated to the mark of the beast came up during the interviews several times and it is clearly a theme that is important in pandemic discourse, particularly among people of the Christian faith who are the majority in the country. According to the Malawi population and housing census, more than 75% of the population claim to adhere to the Christian faith, with Catholics making up the largest denomination (National Statistical Office, 2019). In referencing the mark of the beast, respondents used three interchangeable phrases that invoke the same sentiment that an evil force will use trickery to emboss some sign that will enable this evil force to manipulate people and take them away from the path of good to evil. The three interchangeable phrases that came up during the interviews were: the mark of the beast; 666; and the end times. The issue of the mark of the beast is found in the bible, in the book of revelation where several verses especially in chapters 13 and 14, where the bible says there will come a time when only those with the mark of the beast will be allowed to trade. In addition, the bible also talks about the punishment that will await those who receive the mark of the beast on their forehead or on their right arm in the afterlife.

One female respondent had this to say when asked about some of the challenges in communicating about the vaccine,

“I think social media has been very destructive because people are saying once you receive this vaccine you are going to die, or once you get vaccinated it means you have received the mark of the beast 666, and these are the people that are stopping others from receiving the vaccine. So, it is very important for people to be reminded that we have had vaccines for a long time and if vaccines were the mark of the beast, we would have all received it by now. There were other parents who did not get their children measles vaccine and eventually the children got infected with measles and died, so it is very important that people are encouraged to get vaccinated.”

It is clear that some of these beliefs, such as those linked to the mark of the beast are connected to the fact that people have many unanswered questions and gaps in the communication about the vaccine and its effects that are being filled by such beliefs. One of the male respondents had this to say,

“They need to give us more details about the effects of the disease and the importance of the vaccine, because most of the people don't know the importance of the vaccine. Some people are even scared to go to the hospital to get the vaccine, they think it's the mark of the beast.”

The interesting aspect of these beliefs is that media and communication strategists are not only aware of these beliefs, but they are also confronted with similar issues within their circles of relatives and friends. This is evident from my UN respondent who shared some frustration with a close relative who rejects the Covid-19 vaccine as well as any conversation about the vaccines based on her religious beliefs. She put it this way, *“yeah, the religious aspect of it and whether this fits into the whole paradigm of you knowing that these are end times and it's really feeding into the belief system that we should be aware of.”*

While these may sound like fringe ideas, it is clear that a significant portion of the respondents were able to articulate these beliefs as part of the motivation that people have to reject mandatory vaccines. However, what is missing in the conversation is the voice of faith leaders who are better equipped to address such issues, more than government bureaucrats.

“People Just Saw it as This is How Government Officials Enrich Themselves”

Another important theme that came out of the interviews was the issue of corruption among government officials and how this had a negative impact on communication and media efforts addressing the pandemic. Several respondents argued that the pandemic has afforded opportunities to those in power to enrich themselves at the expense of the population through lies, exaggerations, and inaction, all to misappropriate resources. My media respondent highlighted the loss of interest and trust due to perceived corruption this way,

“I think what we were looking at were cabinet ministers all the time, and the coming in of this abuse of funds, people just saw it as this is how government officials enrich themselves. I feel like the issue of transparency, the issue of accountability is key towards the trust that people have. The moment they see that you are abusing funds, you have lost the people, so it is so hard for you to be able to achieve whatever you want to achieve with the people, so I feel like this is one of the issues that maybe if they were able to get more professionals and other experts into their team that could have helped.”

The issue of the government and its officers enriching themselves from the pandemic, is not just limited to funds that are acquired illegally, there is also an argument that the pandemic has created lawful opportunities for careers which do not benefit the masses. One male respondent makes the assertion that government officials are driven to exaggerate the pandemic in order to maintain funding from international organizations.

Here is how he argued his point, while also faulting young people for doubting the existence of the pandemic:

“I can say that the pandemic is here, but it also brought opportunities for people to make money, to create jobs, therefore they believe that if they say that the pandemic is over, they will lose jobs, and thus they will not get money, you know how hard it is to make money these days. So, the people have this feeling that because those in authority are making money from the pandemic, they are just telling lies about the pandemic. I am also blaming young people for being skeptical about the pandemic, but government should be quick to address such issues, for example where it was said that someone died from Covid-19, but it was not true. Government has never come to dispute such stories and therefore people believe that they are true.”

This point of view is shared by another male respondent who believes that this motivation with money goes beyond government officials, that it extends to leaders at lower levels as well such as traditional leaders. He argued that the spirit of volunteerism has been extinguished and everyone wants to get paid even for communicating with their communities which is what they are supposed to do as leaders, and this is what he said:

“One of the problems I have seen is that these leaders would love to communicate about something, once they see that there is something like money that they are going to get paid. And this has killed a lot of information, (and it does) not reach the people, so we have to take it like you are just volunteering yourself. Say, ok I want to save lives, whether I am going to get paid or not get paid, but I have to do this because, I am doing it wholeheartedly without any motive because you know that your aim is to save lives.”

However it is important to note that such perceptions of corruption especially in relation to aid money, are not really founded in reality, according to Burrowes (2018). There is only vague associations between community perceptions of corruption and actual incidences of corruption. Burrowes (2018), continues to argue that a system of patron-client relationships exist that are rooted in social systems including clans and extended families, which are legitimate cultural expressions that are considered

responsible behavior. The question in this instance is not whether resources have been misused, but rather how widely and equitably the resources have been distributed.

Whether the corruption is real or imagined, the cynicism and distrust for the authorities is real, and it undermines their ability to communicate with people especially during the pandemic. In a period that already poses a challenge to communicators because of the multiple dynamics and changes that necessitate adjustments to messages and media packages. This observation is according to my media respondent who argues that such a loss of trust is counterproductive, and here is how he put it:

“If there is a sour relationship between the government and the people where people do not trust what comes from the government, it will be very hard for whatever the government says to get to the people. Where people are living in either poverty, their issues are not being addressed, when the government speaks, they will close their ears. It is so hard for the messages to reach out to them and make them participate.”

In many ways, this observation may also reflect the confluence between a public health pandemic and political upheaval in Malawi, from mid-2019 to mid-2020 when the constitutional court annulled presidential elections and ordered for fresh elections. The government of the day was considered by many in the country as nothing more than a fraud, and any action taken by the government was seen in this respect. This meant that when the Covid-19 pandemic hit Malawi, the country had a government that lacked legitimacy, and any attempts to enact restrictions were legally challenged or simply ignored.

“I Heard That the Whites Were Preferring Johnsons”

Another important theme that has emerged during the interviews is the issue of vaccine hesitancy, or rejection, or mistrust, which along with access issues contributed to

the low vaccination numbers in the early days of the pandemic. However, over time access issues have been addressed, but demand for Covid-19 vaccines has not kept pace with the improvements in supply and logistics. Several reasons have been put forward to try to account for this hesitancy, and most of the reasons are connected to the media and communication.

The first reason according to my media respondent, is that Malawi did not have a Malawian or African approach to the pandemic, because of the focus on fear inducing messages and he put it this way:

“I think I know where the gap is, our focus was like either, we took the same approach of the western countries where it was more on the issue of how dangerous Covid-19 is. So, it was more like bringing in fear in the minds of people to say this is a dangerous disease and this is what happens, now for people in the rural areas, they were saying that this disease does not belong in the rural areas, it is a disease that you come with from town you get it from whoever you meet in town, and you bring it to us.

Another example of a western approach was the issue of choice, or to put it in other words, the availability of several Covid-19 vaccines for people to choose based on their preference. On this issue, my UN respondent shared the story of a local leader who was frustrated about the issue of choice and became suspicious of the vaccines, because he had never heard of vaccine choice in his life. The UN respondent narrated the story as follows:

“There was one community leader, who was saying in vaccination you don't give us options, you didn't give us options for polio, you didn't give us options for BCG, but now you are saying go for Pfizer or AstraZeneca, so why should we trust that? Why should there be options? so although from a health perspective people think that options are good, but at community level people are saying no.”

This issue with choosing a Covid-19 vaccine was echoed by a female respondent who was not only questioning the issue of choice. But in addition, she was also questioning why some Africans who had been vaccinated with vaccines that were manufactured in Europe were being denied entry into European countries. The female respondent expressed her confusion this way:

“Here we are given the AstraZeneca (vaccine), we are all encouraged, go for AstraZeneca and then we hear that the outside countries in Europe and the surrounding areas, they are not allowing people who were vaccinated with AstraZeneca. So, my question was, you (have) already go(ne) for AstraZeneca, so can you go for Johnsons, because I heard that the whites were preferring the Johnsons. And my question was, they were the same people to manufacture the AstraZeneca so why are they saying that this vaccine is good and this one is not? it’s a bit confusing.”

This observation gives the impression that barring Africans from entry into European countries had nothing to do with their vaccination status but simply an expression of racist and xenophobic tendencies against Africans. Indeed, there are several instances of policies and actions not only in Europe, but in China, the middle east, and other high-income regions of the world (Lamptey & Benita, 2022). Such documented cases of discrimination offer support for the perception of the unjust treatment of African travelers under the guise of pandemic control measures.

The messaging on vaccination has not just been affected by issues of choice, a western approach to media and communication, and perceptions of racial prejudice and discrimination. This messaging has also been affected by the secondary effects of the pandemic, which are seen as more pertinent than the issue of vaccination. Here is how the UN respondent expressed this point:

“Our communication has not really holistically addressed the person, you know, to really see what the challenges are. Because this is happening in the context of economic challenges, social challenges, so why would someone prioritize a jab when she or he is not even affected, so how do we bring issues of the vaccine as a way of life. I think for me the progress has been slow, others are motivated and say, oh there is a vaccine lets go, but others as human beings we are rational, they want to see what is happening first, and then decide. So, for me communication has just touched the tip of the iceberg, but we have not really gone out to understand issues of culture and issues of how people see it normally, yes, we have deaths we have illnesses but most of it hasn't hit home.”

Indeed, dealing with the secondary effects of the pandemic is as important as dealing with the pandemic itself because the shortages in basic needs such as food and income relegates the pandemic from people’s priority lists. This could be one of the reasons why a knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) study commissioned by UNICEF in Malawi, found that vaccine hesitancy exists even though knowledge about Covid-19 and its effects is very high:

we know that there is a lot of vaccine hesitancy, so we are not just saying go for the vaccine because others will not be motivated by that information, they have heard it, if you look at the recent findings, over 95% already know what Covid is, what are the effects, but when you look at the vaccine uptake now, that's when you are questioning, why is it that most people know, but they are not able to transform that knowledge into action?

Other ways of communicating about the pandemic need to be found so that this issue of vaccine hesitancy can be dealt with decisively from a media and communication perspective. It is surprising that the voices of health personnel are particularly silent while the same KAP study that was commissioned by UNICEF also reportedly found that they are the most important voices that people would like to hear during the pandemic according to the UN respondent.

“Covid-19 Came for Rich People”

Several respondents indicate that people in rural areas do not have the same access to information about Covid-19 compared to people who live in urban areas where this study was conducted. Malawi’s rate of electrification sheds light on the disparities in access to media, considering that electricity is the foundation on which the media and telecommunication infrastructure is based. While the overall national electrification rate of 13% is low, this doesn’t tell the whole story as 55% of urban areas are electrified and only 5% of rural have electricity (CIA, 2022). This notwithstanding, there were other factors that affected rural people’s receptivity to information about the pandemic.

According to my district level government respondent (the equivalent of a county in the United States), communication with rural communities took place through mobile audio-visual vans as well as through community radio to maximize reach. My district level respondent who was working as district information officer during the early days of the pandemic explained her experience like this:

“So those gatherings were still happening, you would go to a market, and you would find a group of men gathering and drinking because they believed that Kachasu (a locally brewed hard liquor) would heal them from Covid-19. These gatherings were taking place at mobile markets where they organize a market maybe on Sunday, Saturday, so it was quite a challenge because those mobile markets were still happening. Despite us as a council putting measures, working with Malawi police service you know, to try to sensitize people that those mobile markets should stop at the meantime. So those were some of the challenges that we encountered, and it really gave us a tough time because going into those rural areas trying to convince people that Covid is for everyone, and it is not just for rich people, was not easy. There were even times when we would go out with those mobile vans and then we would be stoned.”

Another difference in the urban/rural dynamic was illustrated by the death of prominent cabinet ministers and other local celebrities from Covid-19 which among the

urban population was seen as proof that the pandemic was deadly and could affect anyone. However, in the rural areas, these same events were seen in a different light. They were seen as evidence that this disease is only targeting rich, famous, and urban people and had nothing to do with rural poor people, according to my district government respondent.

There should be different approaches for urban and rural communities, based on their context, culture, language and access to media and communication infrastructure, but it is also clear that this approach should not simply mirror advertising. According to my media respondent, one-minute adverts cannot make people change, and this is how he explained it:

“I think it would have been better to embrace it (Covid-19 messaging) and say let this be part and parcel of your programming so that you can be able to talk about it in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. Instead of just having an advert in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening and it is done. So, (with) a one-minute advert do we expect that people will change? So, I think this was one of the biggest challenges.”

One of the changes that will reflect this nuanced approach is the move away from simply using the two national languages of English and Chichewa, to include messages that are translated into other languages. These translations will benefit people who are not proficient in English or Chichewa, many of whom are in the rural areas. The issue of using all languages and not just the national languages was well articulated by one of the male participants who expressed this issue of language as follows:

“There are also other languages, despite having our national language which is Chichewa, we also have other languages which are being spoken by different tribes and cultures. So, if this information can be translated into their native languages it can also be very good for them. Because there are some people who don't even speak Chichewa, but they are used to speaking their own tribal

language. Many of them have not even been to school so it would be very difficult for them to understand English or our national language. And we can use those people who know about the language, for instance if I know the Sena language or if I know the Tumbuka language I could help to translate. This means that the information that is translated from English or Chichewa to the Tumbuka language will help to reach out to the Tumbuka people easily, it will be very easy for them to get the information.

The nuanced nature of the issues directly connected to Covid-19 demand that deeper conversations take place with affected populations and the choice of media, language, and approach should reflect that need. And it is safe to say that current approaches are not reflective of the complex nature of the pandemic and do not provide all the necessary tools needed to have an effective media and communication campaign.

“The Pandemic is Only Explained From a Scientific Point of View”

This acknowledgement that a more nuanced and deeper engagement is needed between communicators and their audiences, also brings up the need for simplified messaging that will resonate with the audience members. In addition to using local languages to communicate better with communities, especially in the rural areas, some complex terminologies, especially scientific ones also need to be simplified. This act of simplifying information sounds obvious but is even more salient in the Malawian context because there is a reliance on local leaders as communication agents both in times of public health emergencies and normal times. One of the traditional leaders made the argument as a practical matter saying:

“Most of the traditional chiefs that we have are not all that educated and I think the government needs to continue simplifying the messages for them because if our local leaders do not understand then we have got all the reasons to believe that even their citizens in their areas will also not be able to understand. So, it must start with the local leaders, the messages must be simplified, all technical

languages should be removed from the messages, the messages should be in plain language that anybody can understand.

The fact that many traditional leaders do not have a formal education should be common knowledge among communicators in Malawi, but the way communication strategies are designed, seems to overlook this basic fact. This is evident in the continued emphasis on using technical jargon by technical specialists in media, when communicating with local people.

The issue of knowledge has already come up in this chapter, with several respondents suggesting that people in rural areas lack information and that is why they have largely not adopted preventive actions such as wearing masks. However, it has also been shown in this chapter that efforts to communicate with rural people have taken place through media outlets, even though the adoption of preventive practices and vaccination have been poor. To address this issue, one of the community leaders sheds some light on what is wrong with the current approach:

The pandemic is only explained from a scientific point of view which is of course accurate or true, but we are looking at a person, a standard 5 dropout may not be able to understand this scientific knowledge. So, all the messages carry this approach, and an ordinary person may not be able to understand what the government is talking about.

The literacy rate for Malawi stands at 65.75% according to Countrymeters (2022), which measures whether one is able to read and write basic facts about themselves. So, while the figure sounds impressive, there are many geographic, age related, and gender differences that affect people's ability to engage with media and communication. While these dynamics are understood, sometimes they are trumped by practical considerations

as the district level government respondent discussed the difficulties of coming up with tailormade messaging:

“It was a little bit challenging, not a little bit, it was challenging. So, what I had done was that if I had to group these people, based on spiritual beliefs, we will not manage so I had just developed general messages.”

The reality of communicating in low resource communities is that tough choices will be made by communicators when deciding what type of media strategy to follow including how to allocate resources. It appears that such tough choices are being made solely based on resources that can be linked directly to Covid-19 funding, rather than based on the technical, personnel and material resources that already exist in government and communities. This idea is supported by the media respondent who argues that communication priorities and agendas are driven by donors who fund those initiatives. He argues that the use of generic messaging is not just an easy solution devised by Malawian communicators, but it is also in response to donor prerogatives: *“sometimes it is donor driven, some of these generic messages are coming from the west, the western philosophy to say these are the messages blah blah blah, this is how the disease is transmitted blah blah blah.”* So, it is clear that the scientific focus to messaging is driven by convenience, adherence to donor conditions, a lack of resources to invest in personnel intensive approaches, and a lack of imagination and innovation.

“How did They Recover if You are Saying There is No Treatment”

One of the critiques of the current approach to media and communication addressing the Covid-19 pandemic from the media respondent is that the government has relied mostly on 60 second jingles and radio spots to communicate about the pandemic.

The media respondent called for a more engagement intensive approach with audiences and this is how he put it:

“They (government) took it from the business perspective, so only at that time when you are supposed to talk about Covid-19, the Covid-19 advert is supposed to come. I think it would have been better to embrace it and say let this be part and parcel of your programming so that you can be able to talk about it in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. Instead of just having an advert in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening and it is done. So, with a 1-minute advert they expect that people will change?”

While this approach may have had some value in the early days of the pandemic when information about the virus was largely unknown, it should have been changed once more information became available, and more complex topics like vaccines became more dominant. It is not clear whether any evaluations of the strategy have been undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the current approach in dealing with more complex issues including vaccine hesitancy.

On the other hand, there could be a number of reasons why there was such a focus on short messages on radio and television, such as a lack of resources. Another factor that may also account for this complacent approach was the assumption that people will follow pandemic mitigation measures out of fear of dying. For example, the media respondent argues that government assumed that people would move to get vaccinated and follow the other preventive practices for this very reason:

“I think in the beginning it was more to say there are people dying because of Covid-19, so I think the approach from government was that because people already know that people are dying, they are afraid of this disease. So, if we just tell them to come and get vaccinated, they will come, they will rush and get vaccinated. But then that is not what happened, you had people who were like no, we cannot go and get vaccinated we will stay here, if it means us dying, we will die we will just stay here.”

In addition to the reliance on fear of death as a motivation for people to adopt preventive practices, people were also confused by some of the messages in the early days of the pandemic. Not only were some of the messages confusing, some of the messages also had contra meanings to the intended messages, which also added to the confusion in the messaging. One example of a confusing message was the daily updates that were being provided by the government's Covid-19 task force. One of the updates provided by the task force was concerning people who had recovered from Covid-19. The idea that some people had recovered from Covid-19 when it had also been clearly stated that there was no cure for this disease left many people confused as narrated by the NGO respondent:

“For example, there was an official message that was going on kuti (that) there is no treatment for Covid-19, “we don't have treatment as of now for this virus,” that was the message before the vaccine. And then there were some contradictions because you could see that every day there were some updates that were being provided. For example, the message would say, 50 people have contracted the virus, and so far, 20 people have recovered. Now people were asking, how did they recover if you are saying that there is no treatment, how did they recover? So, it was very difficult to explain to the audiences what the people were undergoing for them to recover. Because recovering was associated with treatment, how did they recover?”

This issue of people recovering from Covid-19 without treatment was not the only source of confusion, some of the core prevention messages, especially the one on social distancing also caused confusion. Those people who tried to observe social distance, found themselves also sending unintended messages that were difficult to comprehend, especially among people who did not fully understand the transmission mechanisms of Covid-19. The NGO respondent had this to say about the cultural meanings connected to social distancing:

“We talk about social distancing, this is an African context, what are the implications that will have? Because in the African context, when I keep a distance from you, I am sending a message, either I am not happy with you, or I am not interested in you, so for people to understand that this is coming as a result of Covid-19, it took us a long time.”

While messages with contra meanings like this may have a negative effect on social interactions, and the adoption of preventive measures, others also felt that the approach that was taken by government to convince people to get vaccinated was coercive and unacceptable. According to the male community leader, this is another reason why people were rejecting Covid-19 messages:

“They (people) are surely failing to accept these messages, because you see, where the government is using a policy to force people to get vaccinated, then people are raising their eyebrows, they are failing to understand what is happening. Messages should come in a way that people should be able to appreciate, why should they go and get vaccinated? And they should voluntarily go and get vaccinated upon getting the right information, yes, but not hiding behind a policy. Because people will go but they don't understand why the government is doing this.”

The confusion in messaging coupled with a coercive approach and short engagement times on mass media with semiliterate audiences may not be very effective. However inexpensive, and interactive tweaks can be made within existing limitations to improve the situation.

“We Can Use Indigenous Knowledge”

There are local media and communication platforms that would provide the space and opportunity for a deeper engagement between communicators and their audiences to address the ambiguities, confusions, conflicting meanings, and beliefs. Using indigenous knowledge to communicate with local communities provides a familiar platform that reduces problems in understanding new or complicated concepts. These local media

platforms are known to communicators and media practitioners already and it is therefore baffling that such platforms are seldom used or not used at all. For example, the government respondent had this to say when asked how the current media and communication initiatives could be improved to respond to the people's needs during the pandemic:

Maybe we should use the already existing forums, sometimes they have fireside stories, they can use such forums rather than staged drama which is a bit expensive to get to the village. So, we can use indigenous knowledge, those people are not completely blank, they have some other forums that they can use other than the ones we encourage them to use, to share some stories, that too we have not done much, using indigenous knowledge so that we can increase participation.

This acknowledgement that there has been limited use of indigenous knowledge and local platforms could be one of the reasons why there has been limited success in convincing people to adopt Covid-19 preventive practices including getting vaccinated. This situation is particularly concerning in rural areas where health services are scarce, there are limited personnel, with limited funding for extension services, hence the need to focus on prevention. One of the existing cadres that has largely been ignored is traditional healers, who are not part of the formal health structure but are nevertheless active and trusted by local people. In many instances, people in rural areas go to traditional healers as their primary health care providers and only consider health facilities as a second tier for complicated ailments. Here is what the NGO respondent had to say about the role of traditional healers specifically their role in communicating about the Covid-19 pandemic:

“We know in Malawi we also believe in traditional healers, and herbs. I will give you an example of a case in Karonga, where we have a traditional healer in Karonga district who is working within the periphery of the border between Tanzania and Malawi. At this place you have patients coming from Tanzania to

Malawi, and patients from within Malawi. Before Covid-19 these patients were being admitted because he had makeshift shelters where he could admit patients from both countries. When we went there, we met this traditional healer to help him understand the issues of Covid-19 and how cross border referral of patients could be one of the factors contributing to the spread of Covid-19. And very quickly he understood the process, he accepted it and immediately he changed his approach, so people from Tanzania were supposed to be tested first before they come to Malawi.”

While this is an example of a single case in one district, there are hundreds of traditional healers who are operating in all districts in Malawi and their role and influence in healthcare and communication cannot be overemphasized. In a study on care seeking for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in southern Malawi, it was found that over 37% of people with STIs sought help from traditional healers before going to a health facility (Zachariah, 2002). What is more interesting are the reasons for choosing traditional healers, which according to Zachariah (2002), is their reputation for being sympathetic, more confidential, and easily accessible.

In addition to traditional healers, other communication platforms are the faith communities, mostly Christian denominations, and the Muslim community. These faith communities have not necessarily been ignored like the other communities, but one can argue that they have not been engaged effectively. For example, one of the community leaders, a faith community leader, says that government engages his church community through letters that are sent by the ministry of information. These letters address the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of transmission, prevention, and the other basic information about the pandemic. However, this approach has limited the role of the faith leaders to that of message amplifiers within their congregations using generic messages. It can be argued that faith leaders can play an even bigger role if they are strategically engaged to

address dogmatic beliefs that are connected to the Covid-19 pandemic such as the connection between vaccination and the mark of the beast. This belief was referenced earlier in this chapter, and the faith community leader respondent had this to say when asked about the role of faith leaders in addressing such beliefs:

“Yes, I have heard some people trying to connect this to the antichrist in the church setup where they are saying this is the sign of the coming of Jesus Christ and they are saying this is the rule of the anti-Christ at work. So, we have seen that the government has gone out and tried to maybe correct this error, but because the government is not using churches on some of these doctrinal issues then it becomes a problem. because a government spokesperson cannot competently speak about issues of church doctrine. So, I still feel the government should continue using churches, when it comes to wrong teachings, churches are able to overcome those wrong teachings, not the government officials. The government officials are not thoroughly equipped to handle such doctrinal arguments.”

So, it is clear from this argument that while government has tried to raise awareness about the Covid-19 pandemic by working with faith community leaders, they could be doing more to broaden the media and communication landscape by giving them a more strategic role.

“Think of the Person as a Whole”

In Malawi, just like in many other countries, the Covid-19 pandemic has been primarily viewed as a health emergency and this has affected the way resources are allocated as well as the media and communication strategy. While the pandemic has had multi-faceted effects on society largely because of the pandemic prevention and mitigation measures which have devastated the social and economic life for many people. It is interesting to note that communicators have focused on Covid-19 as a disease and how to prevent it from spreading, while their audience has been focusing on how to

survive and feed their families. This situation was made even worse in some communities where people did not believe that Covid-19 was real but were impacted by the restrictions to movement and trading.

Even though communicators are aware the current focus of pandemic messaging is not in-line with people's needs, they nevertheless continue to focus on health messaging. For example, the UN respondent argued that the messaging needs to be broadened to appeal to people with different motivations:

“Some of us in community development and resilience have argued to say, let us widen the scope, think of the person as a whole. The motivation may not necessarily come from saying let me protect myself from the disease, it may come from saying I want to get in the bank so let me get vaccinated. So how do we work with such institutions to ensure that now we are tapping into all the experiences that a person has.”

Indeed, the question of what motivates people to act is an important one that communicators need to pay serious attention to, especially in a pandemic as disruptive to life as Covid-19 has been. In many instances, people were worried more about living than dying, as highlighted by the media respondent:

“People were asking themselves; how do we survive? They were looking at the reality of Covid-19 yes, but how do they survive? Others were even breaking the rules or breaking the regulations that were set by the government because what was haunting them the most was how do we survive? How do I feed my family? How do I look after myself? I think much weight goes to how they survive, how they cope with life and continue feeding their families. Covid-19 for them is still a threat, but I think much weight was going on how to survive because we had other people who were saying, what if Covid-19 goes away tomorrow, life still has to go on. So, I would say that most of the people were looking at how to make sure that they are still earning a living, that they are still making some money.”

While one cannot say for sure that the focus on health in messaging at the expense of the other social and economic issues has limited the effectiveness of media and

communication initiatives, it is clear these issues are connected. Covid-19 as a pandemic has been a trigger that has brought about other serious social and economic issues that also need to be addressed as part of the pandemic media and communication initiatives. Indeed, the connection between the pandemic and the social and economic effects is an intimate one that cannot really be isolated. This connection was clearly articulated by one of the community leaders who had this to say:

“All these issues are connected, for example when one has been laid off from his or her workplace they go back home and there is no money, he has a huge family. You know what it means in the African setup, when you have no money and you cannot feed your family, you should expect that there will be problems in the family. You know the man is the head of the family and it is expected of a man to take up his responsibility. So, there are a lot of problems that can emerge, because one is no longer in his leadership position in the family, because of the lack of resources. So, in the African setting, you see that we believe in the extended family, alright I am here but there are also other people who are depending on my support so those people will also be affected. So, you will see that the genesis of all the issues that we are talking about is Covid-19, so it has brought a number of problems and all those problems are related because they have one source which is Covid-19.”

The NGO respondent also attested to this connection between the pandemic and socio-economic effects, arguing that for a landlocked country like Malawi, it is not only the in-country restrictions that matter, even Covid-19 restriction in other countries have an effect:

“We have Covid-19 here, inducing all these fears, people losing their jobs, people working from home, and then an employer can say, you are working from home, so we can as well do without you. For example, some companies depend on raw materials which were not getting shipped because of Covid-19. In South Africa they closed factories, so some materials were not coming to Malawi and that affected industry. So, some companies closed down and laid off staff. Then the people who are laid off ended up having economic challenges and because of that, we have a lot of mental health issues and we have seen a rise in suicides. So, it is a chain, and like you are asking me it has been a lot of linkages and we have seen a lot of economic impacts and social impact. Families have been

disintegrating, education has been disturbed. It has affected a lot of systems, health system, educational system, it is a chain which I can talk more and more endlessly, but you will see that the link is Covid-19.”

It can be seen from the foregoing that the narrow focus on the health aspects of Covid-19 in media and communication initiatives is at best incomplete and otherwise ineffective because it ignores some of the most elemental aspects of human existence.

Conclusion

In this section, I have shared the key findings of this study as expressed by the different respondents, both regular people as well as media and communication experts drawn from different organizations. This study has shown that media and communication initiatives related to the Covid-19 pandemic primarily focuses on health aspects while paying little attention to the social and economic effects due to restrictions that have come with the pandemic.

This study has also demonstrated that both traditional media as well as social media have been widely used by people to learn about the pandemic, and audiences have shown that they understand the strengths and weaknesses of the different media channels. Social media has particularly been credited with providing so much information, some of which is useful and other information which the respondents have found to be either untrue or misleading.

In addition, this study has also demonstrated that the institutions that have been empowered to communicate about the pandemic have serious internal bureaucratic challenges as well as external competition that affects the effectiveness of their work. In

addition to these internal challenges, there is also a perception of inefficiency and corruption among the general public that also affects their receptiveness to messaging.

Finally, this study has also shown that there are many beliefs that are connected to faith that challenge some of the key Covid-19 mitigation measures, especially vaccination that require an increased role among faith leaders. In fact, all other community leaders have a big role to play in communicating with their communities in a language that they understand and using channels that people are familiar with such as traditional gatherings and faith groups.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Results

Introduction

In this chapter, I am going to analyze and discuss the theoretical significance of the key findings in this study based on the two main theories namely: the culture centered approach (CCA) and problematic integration (PI). As highlighted in earlier sections, these theories are being used as lens through which risk communication has been practiced in Malawi during the current Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, I am also going to reference communication for development (C4D) which is also known as social and behavior change (SBC) communication. C4D is seen as the framework for all communication for behavior and social change broadly, and thus there is also a need to look at risk communication which is more specific to public health emergencies to critically evaluate pandemic media in Malawi.

Based on theoretical guidance from the aforementioned theories i.e., CCA and PI, the discussions in this chapter will examine the findings of this study as it relates to the media landscape, culture, agency, structure, and uncertainty. These key constructs will help to explore whether current media and communication approaches meet the communicative needs of the population or not. In addition, it will also help explore whether the current media approaches help audiences to navigate through the challenges of living in a pandemic with limited financial and other resources.

To be more precise, this discussion will help to answer the question of whether current approaches to media and communication during the Covid-19 pandemic have been effective or not, in addressing the needs of the population. The discussion will also

help to explore the weaknesses and rationale for current approaches in line with the theoretical frameworks highlighted in the previous paragraph. Finally, the analysis of findings will highlight the gaps in the current approach, recommendations for improvement, and areas for additional research to strengthen media and communication approaches in a pandemic in Malawi. This should help to create a better understanding of what works and what does not work as far as current media and communication initiatives in the context of a pandemic in Malawi are concerned.

Media Landscape

The location of this study in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi is significant especially in relation to media access because it is a sample of a small portion of the population, about 20% which resides in urban areas across Malawi according to the 2018 census. The presence of electrification and the subsequent investments in telecommunication equipment, provides various options to urban populations, much of which does not exist in rural areas. It is therefore not surprising that social media was prominent in this study as a preferred source of information on the pandemic as opposed to traditional media such as radio and television. While it is very likely that people in rural areas would report different media preferences, it is also important to note that social media is a rapidly growing media platform. According to Kemp (2021), the number of internet users in Malawi grew by over half a million from 2020 to 2021 in a country with an estimated 20.2 million inhabitants.

It is therefore surprising to find out through this study that media and communication planners did not have a cohesive strategy for social media particularly

WhatsApp and Facebook which were the platforms that respondents highlighted. Not having a cohesive strategy does not mean that social media is not being utilized but that current uses are very limited and ad hoc in nature. Currently, social media is being as a medium for sharing electronic copies of print materials such as posters and brochures, and for getting reports from field operatives, and not engaging with audiences to have dialogue about their experiences during the pandemic. This one-way, top down dissemination of curated information does not reflect the sophistication or agency of the targeted communities. Young people in Malawi are the savviest users of social media in the country just like in many other countries around the world. Young people are attracted to social media because of its accessibility, practicality, ease of use, low cost, and immediacy according to respondents in this study. However, this study has also found that young people are critical users as far as social media is concerned, in that they are skeptical and question the veracity of any information they encounter. This means that media and communication experts have to devise ways in which they can engage with an active audience that will ask questions and offer suggestions that can benefit their communication campaigns.

Servaes and Lie (2015), talk about the two methodological schools in communication: the first school focusing on communication campaigns using marketing techniques and the second school which focuses on participation, empowerment, and democratization. It is very clear from this study that media and communication experts adopted the first school, which explains even their approach to social media. This approach as defined by Riley and colleagues (2017), focuses on increasing knowledge to

changing attitudes about a particular behavior or practice that will eventually lead to social change. While this approach may have worked during the early days of the pandemic, the strategy should have been changed to follow the second school, once more complex issues like the vaccine took center stage. As the pandemic evolved, so did the issues that people were dealing with, which in time moved from just a concern about contracting the virus, to more social and economic issues as a result of pandemic mitigation measures.

The current approach to media and communication is too simplistic to give people alternative narratives to counter prevailing tales about vaccine lethality or the even the idea that vaccines are being forced onto people as the mark of the beast. In fact, Ndhlovu (2017), argues that this approach of ignoring the contributions of audiences, is a reflection of neo-liberal framing of media initiatives. In this type of framing, local people are seen as having no agency and no voice, they are simply co-opted participants who are expected to adopt preventive practices after being exposed to such media initiatives. This approach, which focuses on generic messaging as outlined by the district government respondent to this study, is not inspired by people's needs. On the other hand, it is driven by convenience, adherence to donor conditions, a lack of resources to invest in personnel intensive approaches, and a lack of imagination and innovation. This lack of imagination and innovation explains the inability to utilize social media and its affordances to reflect the voices of the marginalized, and to adapt initiatives to the dynamic pandemic landscape.

A complete rethinking of media and communication strategies in a pandemic to include indigenous knowledge is needed in a resource poor country like Malawi. Instead of just focusing on risk communication theories such as protective action decision model (PADM), or the extended parallel process model (EPPM). African paradigms such as Ubuntu should also form big part of the media strategy because it ensures that media experts take the needs and views of their audience into account as they design media initiatives. Ubuntu focuses on how people relate to each other and the moral aspects of community organizing with an emphasis on values such as respect, generosity, consensus and mutual care (Geber & Keane, 2013). These values are more salient in Malawian societies and would improve people's reaction to and engagement with media and communication during the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Culture

Culture is a very broad and complicated concept that has been studied by many scholars but as far as this study is concerned, the exploration of culture is defined by the culture centered approach (CCA). According to Dutta (2015), culture in the culture centered approach, is an emergent subalternity that is actively opposed to neoliberal development discourse through active participation in everyday politics. As far as participation is concerned, Malawians have engaged in various conversations about the pandemic and its impact on other aspects of life during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, what is clear is that most of these conversations have taken place outside the formal media and communication space, they have mostly happened organically within communities without a formal structure that escalates to the experts. It is interesting that

the voices of target groups are largely silent based on the responses of both media experts and audience respondents. Both groups have referenced phone-in programs and responses to pretests of communication materials as an example of audience participation.

Obviously this is not real participation, it is tokenistic, and as Makwambeni and Salawu (2018) argue, referring to such contacts as participation can only make sense when one looks at them from the perspective of the experts. This kind of participation satisfies the ideological and philosophical requirements of donors, which tend to override the needs of target populations.

When we think about any culture, we cannot separate values especially when it comes to epistemology, because the way people learn about new ways of living with the pandemic should be consistent with how they learn other important aspects of life. It is difficult for indigenous ways of learning to be incorporated in formal strategies of media and communication because these indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) are seen as counterproductive and undesirable. The same African media and communication experts who could ideally be championing traditional learning methods are the ones who are in the forefront undermining these approaches. Raseroka (2008), argues that educated Africans are accomplices in the systematic elimination of African epistemologies in favor of foreign paradigms. It is noteworthy that Lilongwe, where this research was conducted, is sometimes referred to as the proverbial “melting pot” of Malawian culture, by virtue of it being the capital city. This should make Lilongwe a microcosm of Malawian culture but there was no sense of cultural pride among respondents, indeed 13 out of the 17

participants referred to their home villages as places where people need to be civic educated.

This view of rural areas and by extension, culture, by the respondents to this study who are urban dwelling Malawians is reflective of culture as a contested space, as outlined by Olufowote (2011), who posits that culture should be seen from two schools of thought. The first school sees culture as a site for participation in development discourse, while the second school sees culture as a site of resistance to hegemony and a tool for liberation. This study has found some evidence of both schools of thought as defined by Olufowote (2011). In the first instance, media and communication experts have indicated that audience members participate in the development of media materials through pretesting and formative research. The media experts contend that such participation allows them to develop communication materials that are relevant and reflect the reality of lived experiences among their audience members. However, the men and women who participated in this study have expressed cynicism about media efforts and have called for more contact with experts to share ideas and get clarification on complex issues.

It is clear from the responses in this study that media and communication initiatives have not been successful particularly in promoting vaccination and mask wearing just to mention two key interventions. All media experts from the government, NGOs, UN, and media houses in this study acknowledge this shortcoming and they all attribute it to different aspects including culture and beliefs. The complaints against culture and beliefs are not unique to this study, according to Airhihenbuwa and Obregon (2000), beliefs are seen as a barrier to communication that should be overcome in order

to have effective communication. Beliefs are thought to be on the opposite end of the spectrum from knowledge because they are neither scientific nor regimented. For example, rural people in this study were reported to have the belief that Covid-19 is an urban disease that affects rich people, and that the disease has nothing to do with rural people. While such a claim is not true in terms of the etiology of the disease, the trend in the nation at the time was in line with this belief. More people in urban areas were being tested and the tests were being reported than in rural areas, and this can be due to various reasons, but nevertheless it painted a picture of urban areas being the epicenter of the pandemic. According to respondents in this study, the first instinct among experts was not to use this belief to initiate discussions, but to dispel it using scientific arguments to convince people that Covid-19 affects everyone.

However, Porat and colleagues (2020) caution against overreliance on a scientific approach which emphasizes that improving knowledge and understanding are prerequisites of action. The second caution from Porat and colleagues (2020) is that scientific information is not infallible, in fact it tends to be incomplete and subject to change. This study has found instances of high knowledge and low action, even resistance, and instances of incomplete information and constantly changing recommendations. One community leader in this study cautioned against this overreliance on scientific information because it is complicated and many community leaders who are not educated struggle to communicate with their people. The community leader specifically asked for all messages to be simplified and all technical jargon to be taken out of such messages, which is the opposite of how technical experts communicate.

Technical experts rely on communication strategies that are based on the logics and approaches of social scientific theorizing with a particular focus on knowledge as a prerequisite for behavior change. For example, the protective action decision model (PADM) by Lindell and Perry (2012), is one of the most influential theories in risk communication. This theory focuses on the intention to act as the most important antecedent to behavior, and this intention to act grows as a result of exposure to information, thereby increasing the likelihood of adopting recommended actions.

This basic assumption of universal learning that is packaged in universal theories and objective scientific knowledge that is generalizable in all contexts is disputed by several authors particularly those from the global south. For example, Kessi (2017), argues that the generalization of knowledge and promotion of universal knowledge is a colonial legacy designed to accumulate knowledge, wealth, and power in service of western hegemony. Muwanga-Zake (2009), also lends support to this view, arguing that the scientific objectivism found in western paradigms, does not augur well with the socially and qualitative oriented African cultures. Therefore, the ideology, theories, strategies, and approaches cannot and should not be adopted in a cookie-cutter fashion but should be adapted and combined with local theories and approaches to be relevant. Indeed, with respect to indigenous knowledge, Raseroka (2008), posits that information sharing within indigenous knowledge systems depends on face-to-face interactions and voice projection methodologies such as drums and horns.

Kendrick and Mutonyi (2007), go even further to argue that African cultures are founded in oral traditions which are predominantly performative and highly interactive.

Media and communication experts are aware of the potency of local approaches, as illustrated by the government respondent in this study. In response to a question about how current approaches can be made more effective, he proposed going back to indigenous ways of communicating to improve communication about the pandemic, particularly vaccine promotion. While there is rhetorical acceptance of indigenous ways, media and communication experts in Malawi have not utilized them in their media strategies in a meaningful way. Instead, they have shown a preference for an advertising approach with 60 second radio and TV spots which are simple, cheaper, and quantifiable, as described by the media respondent to this study. It appears that simplicity, low-cost and measurability hold sway, as part of what Waisbord (2015) refers to as the search for “magic bullets” which can be thrown at different problems and deliver instant results. In this approach, there is no room for the deliberative, human resource intensive face to face approaches that resonate with oral traditions, the focus is on achieving results as defined by donor agreements.

As discussed in the literature review section, Malawian culture is heavily influenced by the concept of *Ubuntu*, or *uMunthu* as it is commonly understood in the national language of Chichewa (Oppenheim, 2012). It is important to appreciate that there is no separation between cultural values, in this case *Ubuntu*, and the way people express themselves and communicate with each other. Cultural values not only define how one ought to communicate with other people, but they also when and under what conditions dialogue should take place. Some of the *Ubuntu* defining values including respect, being generous to others, consensus building, and caring for each other are

equally salient in communication (Geber & Keane, 2013). Therefore, these values should be instructive to communication experts as to the way media and communication initiatives should be designed in a predominantly oral society like Malawi. Indeed, as argued by Nxumalo and Mncube (2018), *Ubuntu* epistemologies just like other IKS follow the oral tradition, using proverbs, poems, songs, and traditional ceremonies as the means for communication and dialogue. These values and communication approaches are as relevant in these times of pandemic as they are outside on emergency contexts and should be used to shape media initiatives.

It is fair to say that over the years the appreciation of the role of culture in media and communication has grown, but there are still experts in the field who view culture as a fossilized historical artifact as described by Airhihenbuwa and Obregon (2000). Indeed, others go beyond this view of culture as a historical artifact, to view culture as something that can be commodified and monetized (M. J. Dutta, 2018). Such critiques of culture as conceptualized in neoliberal development discourse have been rendered true by the absence of authentic voices of marginalized people in media during the current pandemic in Malawi. Several respondents in this study, up to eight of them, have called for interactive sessions with experts to help them understand important information about the pandemic and make decisions about vaccination. However, such interactive sessions have not taken place, not just because of Covid-19 pandemic mitigation protocols such as the social distancing measures, but also the banning of any in-person groupings of people. While these measures ran counter to the request for in person interactive sessions, media and communication organizations have their own decrees. Both the government and the

other media stakeholders have at various times in the pandemic, stopped their staff from traveling to communities and instead had them working from home. This means that the voice of the marginalized is not reflected in the media discourse, thus the marginalized are not responsible for defining their own problems and proposing solutions (M. J. Dutta, 2018).

As much as this denial of people's access to interactive and performative communication can be attributed to various pandemic guidelines and policies, those guidelines are themselves a product of the Eurocentric canon. According to Mbembe (2015), this Eurocentric canon privileges the western way of knowing at the expense of other epistemologies, to put it more precisely it is hegemonic. This Eurocentric canon is the foundation of the ideological values of most implementing organizations especially international NGOs and donor agencies which influence the framing of policies, strategies, and initiatives (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). While it would be unrealistic to expect organizations to put their staff in danger to reach communities in need, it is also hard to justify the longevity of policies long after the vaccine was available, and masking had been mainstreamed. It feels like media experts were content with strategies that are quantifiable (for reporting purposes) and not necessarily strategies that would be effective in bringing about real change. In any case, this western orientation is not an alien phenomenon to educated Africans who are responsible not only for implementing Eurocentric policies, strategies, and initiatives, but are also responsible for undermining indigenous methods. According to Muwanga-Zake (2009), educated Africans are trained

in an education system suffering from a legacy of colonialism and they unwittingly perpetuate colonial fallacies such as the supremacy of scientific methods over all others.

This issue of western orientation also came up during the study in relation to two issues, the first one is a critique of the focus on fear inducing messages as a strategy for promoting the adoption of preventive practices and the second one is the issue of vaccine choice. On the issue of fear inducing messaging, Witte (1994), argues that fear inducing messages should also emphasize people's efficacy in order to trigger dread which is more adaptive than fear, fear has a paralyzing effect. As far as the situation in Malawi is concerned, the focus in messaging was on the lethality of the virus, which instead of motivating people to act pushed them to a fatalistic posture where they felt doomed with no recourse to change the situation. As reported by the media respondent in this study, there was little emphasis on people's efficacy to act in the messaging that was coming out of the ministry of health. On the second issue of vaccine choice, the idea of people choosing a vaccine was seen as confusing because it was a novel idea, people had not been exposed to vaccine choice before. It should be noted that all previous vaccination campaigns had never given people the right to get a vaccine of their choice either for themselves or their children. So, when they were confronted with this option to choose in an environment of poor communication, financial hardships, and misconceptions, it created a fertile ground for conspiracy theorizing.

So, the question of culture in media and communication is critically important because of its centrality in defining values, the role it plays in orienting people to a way of knowing and learning, as shown in this study. However, this question of culture as

reflected in questions of religion as well as indigenous knowledge systems need to be explored further because of their centrality in the creation of values and learning.

Religion and Culture

The role of religion should not be overlooked in African societies including Malawi where fewer than 5% of the population is unaffiliated to religion according to the 2018 census. The saliency of religion in African cultures is extensive and more so on the issue of morality which according to Okpalike (2015), the difference between European and African morality lies in their foundational bases. African morality according to Okpalike (2015), is based on religious and traditional values while the European approach is based on rationality and ideology. These differences should not only be understood but also respected in the design of media and communication interventions, which does not appear to be the case in Malawi according to this study. For example, while this study reported that the fear of the mark of the beast is one of the reasons why some are refusing to be vaccinated, it is curious that religious leaders' involvement in communicating about the pandemic is nominal. The benefits of involving religious leaders in communication during the pandemic can be seen through Brannelly (2016), who proposes five actions to improve community outreach. These actions include attentiveness to all involved, responsibility, competence (understanding the targeted community), responsiveness (care for people) and solidarity (inclusion of marginalized groups).

If the actions are taken in their totality, religious leaders should have a significant role in all media and communication initiatives during the pandemic because there are

many issues that touch on religious dogma that only they can address. Indeed, a faith community leader who was one of the respondents in this study, questioned the competency of government bureaucrats trying to address faith related issues, arguing that they are not equipped to do that. Tengtenga and colleagues (2021), argue that in many African societies, communities experience the natural, supernatural, and spiritual realms all at once, and although illness is a personal experience, it is also a matter that affects the whole community. The question of how illnesses come about, the connection between an individual to the living and the dead, and how all these aspects come into play for healing to take place are all important elements to consider. This means that for media and communication to be successful, all these aspects of humanity need to be integrated in the strategies and provide space for local leadership to contribute to the efforts.

However, there should be some appreciation of the fact that these aspects of African cultural experience are not static. If we consider religious values as part of the indigenous knowledge systems, Raseroka (2008), argues that these systems should be seen as local and traditional to a society. This means that as far as society itself is dynamic, these local and traditional values are also dynamic and are subject to evolve over time as long as people continually interact and learn from other people. In addition, the fact that local and traditional values are influenced by local technologies which are also dynamic, means that they can also adapt to changes, even though the basic tenets remain the same.

Religion should be viewed from two perspectives, on the one hand it is this pervasive value system that most Malawians subscribe to, but on the other hand others

have critiqued Christianity for instance, as a tool of colonialism. For example, Tenga and colleagues (2021), argue that contemporary Christianity in Malawi is influenced by what they call ‘American individualistic evangelicalism’ which has fed into conspiracy thinking. In addition to the conspiracy thinking, the belief in miracles and wonders has also given the adherents a sense of invincibility. This idea can be seen in the findings of this study where one of the media expert respondents spoke about the frustrations of trying to discuss vaccination with her mother who is a devout evangelical Christian. According to the media expert, her mother shuts down any discussion about vaccination the moment she tries to bring it up, and she does not know how to handle this situation. So if we consider the argument by Okpalike (2015), that religion in the African context is not just influential on culture, it is one of the foundations of culture and therefore media experts should reflect this in their strategies during the pandemic.

Culture and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Cultural competence is a necessity for media experts in the current pandemic because some of the intractable issues including vaccine hesitancy and poor adoption of other preventive methods make it a necessity to have an effective dialogue between experts and their audiences. According to Raseroka (2008), information sharing within indigenous knowledge systems depends on face-to-face interactions and voice projection methodologies such as drums and horns. This is in line with one of the key findings in this study, which is the need for face-to-face interactions between community member and experts, which in many cases has been trumped by scientific recommendations that are generic and applied with little adaptation. Communication should be responsive and

adaptive to the context in which it is being implemented and should respect the people's orientation and preferences. Unfortunately, media and communication experts who are all predominantly Malawian either don't think much about indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) or they lack competence in them. According to Raseroka (2005), this diminished appreciation of IKS is not limited to the experts, even African communities who have learnt that these IKS are worthless and in some cases shameful. It was therefore not surprising that after a long reflection the government respondent in this study said, "maybe we should consider going back to indigenous methods." This was in response to a question on how current media and communication efforts can be improved, and it came almost as an afterthought, which is telling, considering the potency of such systems. Indeed, Raseroka (2008), argues that due to a colonial educational system and the missionary worldview, educated Africans are accomplices in the elimination of African epistemologies in favor of foreign paradigms.

A good example of this undermining of IKS came out during the study, concerning the role of traditional healers in communicating about Covid-19 as they practice their craft. According to Tengtenga and colleagues (2021), there is evidence in Malawi and other parts of Africa that the role of traditional healers in a pandemic is significant. In addition to offering explanations about pandemics to their communities, traditional healers are also sought after as mediators and healers. Irrespective of the influential role that these traditional healers play in their communities, they are intentionally ostracized from the formal structure of public health. This according to Uddin (2011), is another legacy of colonialism where the western epistemology looks at

the African IKS as primitive, and ancient, thus delegitimizing them completely. Indeed, traditional healers are seen as practicing nothing more than witchcraft, as a result, this practice is criminalized and demonized even though in many parts of the country traditional healers are very much a part of the social and communication networks. When we think about community leaders who are influential in health matters, we cannot overlook traditional healers along with traditional leaders and faith leaders.

Agency

According to the culture centered approach, the agency of audiences should be at the center of any discourse that affects their lives, where they can articulate their problems and solutions in line with their cultural contexts (Dutta & Basu, 2008).

According to the culture centered approach, there is a difference between having people at the center of discourse and being coopted to participate in development discourse.

There are examples of agency coming out of this study as expressed by the respondents who are the target group for the media and communication initiatives. At the same time, media and communication expert respondents who represented the government, non-governmental organizations, and the media, also articulated their perspective on the agency of target populations. And it was clear that the people's expectations and the narrative of the experts were somehow divergent. On the one hand the experts were content with audience feedback during pretesting of communication materials, whereas the audience were looking for real dialogue where they would ask questions. To be fair, the media experts did articulate an aspirational level of participation which is much closer to what the audience members are looking for. So, it is not a lack of understanding on the

part of the media experts as to what legitimate dialogue looks like, but for some reason they have not been able to operationalize it.

As highlighted in earlier sections, the request from audience members for face-to-face interactions with government personnel and other experts to answer questions about the vaccine and other topics is one of the key findings of this study. This request is a classic case of audience agency because these people heard the Covid-19 prevention messages on media including social media, and they had questions. The audience had many questions on the efficacy of vaccines, the side effects of the vaccines, the contra effects of the vaccines, and they wanted answers before they could decide to take the vaccines or encourage their loved ones to do the same. These people were not just looking for answers to their questions, they were also looking for an acknowledgement of their humanity, they were looking for respect. This idea of respect is in line with the *Ubuntu* concept which is a set of community organizing principles. As outlined earlier, it is a philosophy that applies to all forms of human interaction and communication among the Bantu people, including Malawians. Geber and Keane (2013), highlight respect among other values such as generosity, and mutual care as the core values of *Ubuntu* emphasizing the importance of acknowledging these values. Indeed, methods of communication including folklore, songs, dances, and proverbs are all part of the rich tapestry of the collective *Ubuntu* way of communicating. It is therefore clear why face to face interactions offer the kind of humanizing approach that is consistent with local epistemologies in Malawi.

Therefore, if target audiences are not at the center of media and communication initiatives that address the pandemic, it will be very difficult for those initiatives to be universally accepted and acted upon. While it is true that initiatives that involve face to face contact between communication experts and their audiences tend to be more expensive, there are ways in which this can be achieved in a more cost-effective way. In addition to finding ways of reducing costs, it is also important to ask the question whether enough resources are allocated to media and communication during the pandemic. The other questions that need to be answered are: how can audience members make their voices heard if they are being left out of the media planning, implementation, and evaluation phases? Are the complaints about funding for media and communication the real issue or is it just a convenient excuse for not doing more with available resources?

Another issue that is similar to audience participation that was also raised by respondents in this study, is that their government is not taking an “African approach” in the way it communicates with communities. In fact, respondents were very clear that they feel that government is simply copying its approaches from western countries without considering the Malawian context. While the current media and communication strategies do bear some results, the focus should not end on results. The processes that people go through, their participation and ownership of these processes are equally important for sustainable results. The current approaches focus on changing knowledge as a precursor for the adoption of recommended behavior. This approach has been critiqued as highlighted earlier in several studies for being simplistic, leaving out many contextual considerations that are equally consequential in changing behavior and norms. This focus

on “individualism, rational choice and cognitive decision making” is not an effective approach (Dutta 2010, p. 535). However, “a process-oriented shift toward listening to local communities and co-creating knowledge through participation of local communities” is what works better in these communitarian, relationship oriented communities (Dutta 2010, p. 536). Indeed, this idea of a top-down infusion of knowledge to change people’s perceptions and actions is reminiscent of the colonial legacy of a universalist epistemology. In non-western communities like Malawi, where the locus of control for behavior change is not the individual, but in community units such as the family, these individualistic approaches are doomed to fail (Collins. O. Airhihenbuwa, 1995).

Therefore, since agency in the Malawian context is more of a collective phenomenon, media and communication initiatives should be structured to reflect this perspective and not just respond to WHO recommendations. It should be acceptable for media and communication strategies to not be totally aligned with scientific recommendations, as long as relevant precautions are taken to prevent infection as much as is practicable. For example, instead of banning gatherings, precautions that would make such gatherings safe would be a better option as far as communicating with a collectivistic community is concerned. In addition to adapting recommendations, Kessi (2017) also recommends a praxis approach that recognizes the agency of community members to articulate their lived realities in a manner that respects their values and context where they are domiciled.

Structure

In this section, I am going to discuss three important aspects of structure that respondents talked about as being critical during the pandemic and these are service provision, corruption, and politics. Structure in the culture centered approach refers to institutions of state and society and how their functions affect the population, in ongoing interaction with communities who have agency that is exercised within a cultural context (M. J. Dutta, 2010). Structural functions including service provision, regulations, and guidelines, are all guided by ideological considerations. In the context of the pandemic, institutions like government ministries, donor agencies, NGOs, and the media are the ones that come to mind immediately and are the focus of this study. These institutions are the ones on the forefront of media and communication funding, strategizing and implementation and are therefore critical when we think about structural issues related to media and communication. However, in the Malawian pandemic media context, when people think about government, their focus is on the ministries of health and information. But according to the findings of this study, there are other government ministries and departments that should be considered critical when it comes to communicating about the pandemic as well. These other ministries include education, trade, the judiciary, and law enforcement, because of their unique roles directly related to the pandemic, especially enforcement of prevention guidelines.

In addition to the aforementioned structures, the culture centered approach primarily focuses on the global development infrastructure and how it seeks to coopt local people into its exploitative neoliberal enterprises (M. J. Dutta, 2015). The strong

presence of various donor agencies and NGOs in countries like Malawi have significant influence on government policies and procedures during this pandemic. This represents the tangible influence of neoliberalism and its incumbent logics on local policies, strategies, and guidelines. In this study, several respondents have criticized government for simply copying its policies and approaches from western countries, without considering the actual needs and context of Malawi. Clearly, such policies are seen as misplaced, and lacking any real connection to the situation of the country, and only attending to the country's international reporting commitments.

Thirdly, traditional structures that fall outside of the formal governmental and non-governmental structures, such as traditional leaderships and religious leaderships should also be acknowledged as cultural institutions. Acknowledgement of these cultural structures should go hand in hand with legitimization of indigenous media which are used by these local structures. Indeed, Airhihenbuwa and Obregon (2000) talk about a redefinition of what is considered media in the African context to include folklore, storytelling, and other oral channels. These are the means through which media audiences have been communicating, and the formal governmental structures need to find ways to inject themselves into these discussions. An example of the power that local leaders can wield is discussed by Olufowote (2011), who narrates how religious leaders halted polio vaccination in northern Nigeria. These religious leaders suspected that the polio vaccines were a ruse by western nations to depopulate Africa and thus put a stop to the vaccination campaign, upending not just the national, but the global campaign as well.

Service Delivery

There are several examples of structural hindrances to the delivery of services, that have come up in the course of this study, focusing on effective media and communication initiatives, but I will discuss two specific examples. The first example is the role of institutional policies and guidelines to mitigate Covid-19 transmission among service providers. And the second example is the issue of institutional competition among service providers, primarily between the ministry of health, and the ministry of information.

The issue with institutional policies and guidelines is that government and its partners and stakeholders including donor agencies and NGOs all developed some form of guidelines based on world health organization (WHO) recommendations. These guidelines were both public facing, regarding what the public should do, or avoid doing to prevent Covid-19, but there were also internal guidelines about how staff and partners should conduct themselves. Both guidelines have an effect on a service delivery system that was already inefficient and in need of improvements. In addition, both the public facing guidelines about social distancing, a ban on small group gatherings, as well as institutional guidelines that banned field travels, did not consider Malawi's peculiar context. According to Tengaenga and colleagues (2021), these Covid-19 guidelines and restrictions had a negative effect on social, religious and economic liberties that impacted the population.

For example, one of the recommendations was that if people needed clarification or additional information related to the pandemic, they should contact their healthcare

providers. This recommendation did not consider the fact that hospitals are so overcrowded, and medical staff are so overworked, that they do not serve much of a communicative role in the communities. In fact, one of the female respondents to this study made this observation that our hospitals are only capable of dealing with sick people, so therefore the idea that one can go to a hospital and ask for information on any topic is impractical. In any case, these health facilities are so few and far between that even if they were to be part of the communication infrastructure, a big part of the population would still be left out.

Another issue was the over-dependence on radio, which many consider the most readily available media, including in rural areas which are hard to reach with other approaches. However, the format of the radio messaging, the duration of the programming, the ability of local people to afford batteries and the household power dynamics all counter the belief in the ubiquity of radio. This overreliance on radio and TV was also found to be an issue during other public health emergencies, and some of the key recommendations coming out of such emergencies was to reduce the over dependence on top-down media approaches. In fact, top-down communication, stereotyping and paternalism were found to be barriers to community engagement from the Ebola, Zika, and yellow fever outbreaks (Toppenberg-Pejcic et al., 2019). Based on their rapid review of gray literature on the aforementioned outbreaks, Toppenberg-Pejcic and colleagues (2019), recommend intense local interactions and a continual two-way communication.

Regarding the question of institutional competition between the ministry of health and information, there was a question of an overlap of mandates and a lack of clarity that led to confusion among stakeholders. According to the government respondent, the ministry of health was responsible for communicating technical aspects of the pandemic in line with WHO guidelines, while the ministry of information was responsible for all civic education. While this sounds clear and even logical in theory, in practice it was a different matter altogether. For example, the media respondent reported that the media, business establishments, and the public at large were all confused about where to go for clarity on pandemic issues. The media respondent reported that whenever a member of the media or the general public approached either of the two government ministries for guidance on some policy or communication, they would be asked to check with the other ministry. If an enquiry was directed to the ministry of health, they would refer that inquiry to the ministry of information and vice versa, which led to a lot of confusion and the belief that government was shirking responsibility. This kind of confusion is exacerbated by the fact that in times of high stress like the pandemic, people tend to be less trusting of authority and are more likely to listen to negative more than positive reports (Glik, 2007).

Not only was there confusion among media practitioners and the public regarding where to get guidance on the pandemic, there was also outright hostility between the two ministries. The UN respondent to this study reported an incident where officials from ministry of health were accusing the ministry of information of not seeking guidance from them anymore reportedly because the ministry of information had secured its own

funding. Indeed, the influence of donor conditionalities on the actions of a funding recipient cannot be denied, but in this instance it was different. The inference is that when the ministry of information goes to the ministry of health to seek guidance, they are in fact looking for funding since the ministry of health is the custodian of a big proportion of Covid-19 funding. This state of competition and conflict is not unique to the Malawian context. According to Waisbord (2015), “Programs in aid and government bureaucracies generally run separately amidst the cautious politics of global diplomacy and intra and interagency competition (p. 147).” In the end, it is the public that suffers when service providers are unable or unwilling to complement each other’s efforts in a pandemic scenario of this magnitude.

While the confusion between the two government ministries is of concern, the absence of other equally important ministries in the communication mix such as the ministry of education and ministry of trade and industry is equally worrying. The role of the ministry of education is particularly significant because schools have had to close down for multiple and considerable periods which necessitated constant communication with learners and guardians. This dysfunction is not just a consequence of disorganization or incompetence, according to Dutta and Basu (2008), the bureaucratic set-up of institutions and organizations constrain the availability of resources for implementing programs. This is both a structural and management challenge for government to activate a government wide communication network that will address diverse groups of people in need of critical information for decision making. Unfortunately, addressing such challenges requires the participation of all relevant stakeholders, which can be an easy

task with the right conditions are in place, but can also be complicated as the current situation in Malawi has demonstrated.

Corruption

As discussed in the previous chapter, the perception of corruption and the reality of corruption may not be the same, however I feel that the perception is equally important in the context of communication. For instance, the media respondent reported that claims of corruption have eroded trust in the government and hence people were not interested in listening to what the government had to say on any issue including the pandemic. Even when people took time to listen to what the government had to say, one male respondent felt that everything about the pandemic was exaggerated to make the communicators look relevant. This is an example of the process of meaning making, which is integral to any society and according to Dutta (2015), structure also gains meaning in the context of culture. As discussed in the previous chapter, within the Malawian context communities may not be worried so much about misuse of resources but rather inequitable allocation of resources (Burrowes, 2018). So, the definition of corruption may not be the textbook definition but what matters is the people's perception because that is what influences their actions vis-a-vis the pandemic.

So, this perception that the government is fundamentally corrupt and that government bureaucrats are simply looking out for their personal interests erodes credibility and influence that can make all the difference in a pandemic. The way respondents narrated the issue of corruption was not necessarily that they have evidence of corrupt practices, but that there were instances that made them suspicious. For

example, one male respondent talked about the suspicion that government was exaggerating Covid-19 case numbers in order to justify funding requests from donors. The reason why the respondent felt this way was that a family member to one of the deceased people whose death was attributed to Covid-19, came out and was claiming that deceased individual died of asthma. And because the government did not come out to challenge this narrative, the respondent concluded that the government's narrative was wrong.

Another incident that was also interpreted as an instance of corruption was when the government made a cash provision of an equivalent of \$30 to some 200,000 people who were considered very poor. The questions that people raised included how these people were identified, why 200,000 people, and how people were getting the money. As people asked these questions, there were no clear answers that were provided by government officials which left people to draw their own conclusions on what happened. As a result, people concluded that this is another example of government corruption. In actual sense, these are all examples of poor communication especially from the authorities to clarify issues that are of public interest and to engage with their audiences and listen to their voices.

Politics

The Covid-19 pandemic coincided with national political upheavals in Malawi as discussed in the previous chapter, and these events influenced media and communication related to the pandemic. For example, the government respondent to this study reported that media and communication experts were agonizing about how to communicate with

the public about restrictions when politicians were the first ones to disobey the rules. Not only were the politicians breaking the rules, but they were also deriding them in their campaigns. For instance, they were arguing that a ban on public groupings was a ploy for an illegitimate government to curtail campaigning so they can stay in power according to one of the male respondents. Clearly the media efforts at the time did not bear fruits, as people considered all recommendations as gimmicks and treated them as such (Tengatenga et al., 2021). So, what does this say about the power of partisan interests in relation to the greater good? Staying silent during a pandemic because people were vested in other pursuits was not an option, at the same time communicating with people who were disinterested in the topic was challenging.

It is not just local politics that were salient, international politics are also largely influential on the Malawian pandemic media landscape as reflected in the responses related to the vaccine. According to Bollyky and colleagues (2021), the allocation of vaccines to developing countries was not based on epidemiology, but geopolitical considerations and saturation of the needs of donor nations. Bollyky and colleagues (2021), talk about Covid-19 producing countries in the west, as well as others such as Russia, China, and India who all looked at their national interests to determine where vaccines could be sent. While these geopolitical machinations were playing out on the global stage, communicators and their audiences were struggling to understand the mixed messages that were inadvertently being sent out. For example, one female respondent spoke about European nations who were refusing entry for those who had received an AstraZeneca vaccine which is also of European origin. While in the past this kind of

information would have taken a long time to reach places like Malawi, these days it is very easy for messages like these to be shared very quickly because of social media. Such messages sow seeds of doubt in vaccine efficacy and safety which runs counter to local media initiatives to effectively communicate about the pandemic. It is difficult to rationalize some of these policies that border on racism to a population that is already skeptical of the pandemic and its related restrictions on everyday life. How can relatively poor countries with limited resources communicate about an issue that clearly has many layers that are outside their control? How can the general public resist this clear show of xenophobic politics that runs parallel to claims of goodwill and humanitarian support?

Uncertainty

The concept of uncertainty is a very important one in times of emergencies or upheaval in people's lives, and it is one that is salient during this ongoing pandemic. According to Babrow (2001), uncertainty is a term that has been used liberally in communication with a wide range of meanings as a theoretical concept and a common term. Uncertainty should be understood to have both ontological and epistemological perspectives that respond to people's contexts. It is a more nuanced concept that reflects cultural, historical, and geospatial characteristics of a people (Babrow, 2001). Ontologically, people's conception of the nature of the world shapes their definition of certainty and uncertainty. On the other hand, factors like sufficiency and validity of information as well as lay epistemologies all define the epistemological perspectives of uncertainty.

Covid-19 has been viewed largely as a health emergency in Malawi; however, it is very clear that people have experienced a more complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted pandemic that brought about different forms of uncertainty. While it can be argued that the disease has not affected everyone in the country directly, it can also be argued that mitigation measures have influenced almost everyone. All the respondents interviewed in this study articulated very clearly the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about many social and economic challenges that have affected their lives in different ways. Respondents reported on the closure of ports of entry into the country, the closure of marketplaces, and the closure of schools which affected almost all families in the country. Many of these challenges are connected to pandemic control and mitigation measures, including the closure of businesses as well as loss of employment and livelihoods. Dutta and Elers, (2020), agree with this description of the pandemic, adding that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about different forms of uncertainties which have affected society's poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised.

As indicated in the literature review section, the approach to uncertainty in this study is based on the definition provided by the Problematic Integration (PI) theory. The main goals of the theory, is a focus on the ubiquity of communication, promoting communicator sophistication, triggering alternative ways of understanding, and promotion of empathy and compassion (Babrow & Striley, 2014). In this study, respondents discussed some of the issues that caused them anxiety such as loss of income, closure of schools, and travel bans, with no social safety net to help cushion them from these challenges. Prior to PI theory, the prevailing orthodoxy on uncertainty

had been that a reduction of uncertainty is the desired outcome for people dealing with disease prognoses for deadly diseases such as cancer. According to Babrow and Kline (2000), such conceptions of uncertainty have been perpetuated by social science research. Indeed, respondents to this study did not believe that more information would reduce their uncertainty, rather they were looking for answers to specific questions they had, because their needs were unique.

In their critique of uncertainty reduction, Babrow and Kline (2000), provide four arguments that point to the inadequacy of such a conception of uncertainty. The first argument is that uncertainty should not be treated as a monolithic experience; the second argument is that uncertainty reduction is not always possible. The third argument is that uncertainty reduction creates new uncertainties; and the fourth argument is that uncertainty does have value in certain instances. An example that came out of this study, was the introduction of online learning after schools had closed, which was a way of ensuring the continuity of education since people were not allowed to congregate in groups. This system was beset by so many technical challenges, including low access and expenses related to mobile data costs which made the system impractical to the average learner. In addition, some respondents in this study reported that they lacked the motivation to participate in online learning and that the home environment and expectations did not make learning a possibility. So, while online learning addressed learning continuity in theory, the practical experience was impractical, inaccessible, and inequitable.

Babrow and Kline (2000), recommend a coping approach to uncertainty, where all forms of uncertainty are appraised to ascertain whether they are an opportunity, a threat or whether they are irrelevant for one's wellbeing. Another recommendation is to come up with strategies that adapt to the specific form of uncertainty because there is no single way of living with the many forms of uncertainty (M. Dutta & Elers, 2020) (Babrow & Striley, 2014). The third recommendation is to understand the communicative complexity of uncertainty to determine whether a reduction, maintenance, an increase or reshaping of uncertainty gives the desired outcome. Finally, Babrow and Kline (2000), recommend that uncertainty should be a trigger for dialogue rather than a barrier to action. It is important to remember that when people are dealing with uncertainty, they are subsequently trying to integrate their beliefs and expectations into a world that they are also striving to understand.

According to the findings of this study, there is no evidence that any of the four recommendations in the previous paragraph were applied in the Covid-19 pandemic media and communication strategies in Malawi. This is reflected in the communicative experiences of respondents to this study who reported that media and communication efforts have only focused on prevention of Covid-19 as a disease. In line with the first recommendation above by Babrow and Kline (2000), there is evidence that media and communication planners understand the triggers of uncertainty even though they did not engage in systematic inquiry. The media and communication experts who participated in this study did indicate that uncertainty was part of their strategies even though they understood its significance. There are several reasons why media and communication

practice does not align with theory to effectively address pertinent issues, and Waisbord, (2015) identified three roadblocks. These roadblocks are “the search for “magic bullets,” the aversion to politics in some quarters, and the weak institutional position of communication” (p. 155). The “magic bullet” mindset according to Waisbord, (2015) is a longstanding fixation in the global aid sphere for very effective, short-term interventions that are also easy and inexpensive to implement. Waisbord, (2015) continues to argue that “The perennial urgency of programs, busy delivering quarterly reports, securing funding and diligently responding to donors, is disconnected from the haphazard, uncertain march of collective action” (p.157).

These roadblocks that were identified by Waisbord (2015) reflects the rigidity of Covid-19 pandemic media and communication strategies in Malawi, to deal with the secondary impacts of the pandemic which were more acute and far reaching. To start with, the singular focus on health messaging dealing with the etiology of the pandemic is based on the fact that funding for the Covid-19 pandemic is made under the health banner. This gives control of the funds for fighting the pandemic to the ministry of health which has a health mandate and focuses on delivering health services including media and communication. The inability to allocate funds based on the country’s needs is exacerbated by the fact that Malawi is a country that is dependent on donor funding to meet its fiscal responsibilities. Much of this support from donors is earmarked for specific programs and interventions, and thus it is difficult for money that has been allocated to health to be used for anything else other than health. This setup extends to media and communication initiatives which derive their funding from these same donor-

funded initiatives. In addition to the funding that follows earmarked allocations, the bureaucracy set up in government, UN agencies, and NGOs all follow a similar pattern. Programs such as health, education, nutrition, protection, just to name a few, are all treated as unique entities with their own funding sources, reporting, and timeframes.

This study did not find any evidence that a formal process of understanding the communicative complexities of uncertainty had taken place, or that such an exercise was planned by any of the media and communication expert respondents. However, from the perspective of the men and women who are the target audience, they are very clear about how the pandemic has affected their careers, families, children's education just to mention a few. Not only are audience members clear about what triggers uncertainty, but they also expressed the need to have communication about these issues and to engage in dialogue with experts. This expressed need dovetails into the fourth recommendation by Babrow and Kline (2000), that uncertainty should be a trigger for dialogue. Such a dialogue will also bring up contextual issues that are relevant to Malawian audiences, considering the culture and the agency of target audiences to come up with effective media and communication strategies that are more holistic.

In line with the findings of this study it is also clear that communities had expectations and priorities that did not align with the focus on preventing infection as defined by the experts, but on other aspects of survival and day-to-day living. As recommended by Babrow and Kline (2000), uncertainties should be evaluated as to whether they are an opportunity, a threat or if they are irrelevant. A nuanced assessment of uncertainty was not undertaken in response to uncertainties that came about as a result

of the economic difficulties, social limitations, and travel restrictions to inform a media and communication strategy for different communities. It is not surprising that the media and communication strategies did not address other relevant issues but only focused on disease prevention because it was not informed by experiences of the audience.

There is some understanding of the communicative complexities especially as it relates to vaccine hesitancy, which was another trigger of uncertainty, but communicators have been unable to respond effectively for various reasons. As reported by the government district information officer, a lack of resources made her deploy generic information even though she was aware that she was dealing with different groups with different needs. For a country with limited financial resources like Malawi, it is common for communicators at district and community levels to have limited financial resources. However, there are many opportunities even in such low financial resource settings to tap into traditional institutions and ceremonies as opportunities for communication. Another related reason to the limited resources is the fact that media professionals are oriented towards generic messaging using mass media. This orientation of media professionals has been challenged by the growth of social media which has increased the speed and variety of messages that the public is exposed to. This study has found that in the capital city of Malawi, there is a preference and reliance on social media for information about the pandemic. And while some respondents have expressed the need to view such information with a caveat, the influence of social media cannot be denied. How communicators can adapt to a social media savvy public is a question that still needs to

be answered considering that they are also learning how to navigate online communication.

Finally, the recommendation by Babrow and Kline (2000), that uncertainty should not be a barrier to action but a trigger for dialogue is another challenge to a media and communication setup that is not as nimble and responsive to a rapidly shifting communicative landscape. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that even the most sophisticated media ecosystem such as the one in the United States of America has struggled to cope with changes in guidelines by the CDC. Given that there have been so many new discoveries and variants of the Covid-19 vaccine, the new guidelines and recommendations have complicated the work of media and communication experts. In the case of Malawi, guidelines and recommendations originate from the World Health Organization (WHO), through the ministry of health to the rest of the country. The challenge with the new regulations is that people are barely familiar with the old guidelines, and new ones come up which in some cases may even contradict some of the old guidelines. This is a recipe for confusion, not just among the general public, but among media experts as well, and some of the frustrations were expressed by the government respondent in this study. The communication dynamics were changing so rapidly in order to keep up with the new scientific discoveries, and it is debatable whether the changes were necessary, or imposed by the WHO.

Chaining Effect

The chaining effect is one aspect of uncertainty that distinguishes the problematic integration perspective as it focuses on the sources of uncertainty and how they are

connected in the way people experience them. According to Matthias and Babrow (2007), this idea of chaining can occur across problematic topics and issues (foci) as well as in ways that uncertainty is experienced. This study established clear connections between uncertainty foci through people's experiences over time, with clear connections to the Covid-19 pandemic as the trigger. In addition to the pandemic being a trigger that can be directly connected to primary socio-economic impacts such as loss of employment, this study also found potential links that could be causal and/or relational with other impacts such as household food insecurity.

Based on the description of the chaining effect within the problematic integration theory, it is clear that this study has established that such an effect has been taking place as reported by a number of respondents. All the issues that have been causing stress and worry among the people are connected, the health issues and the socio-economic issues are all connected to each other. Participants were readily making the connection between Covid-19 with the closure of businesses, industries, and schools, as well as how these closures have caused financial instability in homes, lack of food and other essential supplies.

While the triggers of uncertainty have been common, or shared, the experiences have certainly been peculiar to individuals and families, and based on the reports in this study, it is difficult to say whether a cultural lens can be used to distinguish them as uniquely Malawian. One of the reasons for this is that this study was done in an urban setting where collectivist and individualistic tendencies influence people's lives. It would be interesting to see what differences would be expressed in more rural collectivist

communities where people do not rely on employment but instead eke out a living through subsistence agriculture.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the key findings of this study and their theoretical and practical significance in line with the culture centered approach theory and the problematic integration theory. Regarding the culture centered approach, I have looked at the three constructs of agency, culture, and structure as a lens through which the application of risk communication has been implemented. As far as agency is concerned, this study has found that the people who are targeted by media and communication initiatives, do have a perspective on the pandemic. However, they have not been successful in communicating with experts in large part due to the power imbalance that exists and their inability to initiate dialogue. Communicators have not deliberately created opportunities for their target communities to provide feedback, other than for the channels that exist in non-pandemic contexts. As far as culture is concerned, very little has been done to reflect cultural exigencies within the media and communication strategies. For instance, all recommendations from the WHO have been applied in their totality without reflecting on the practicality, relevance, and impact on people's livelihoods. As far as structural issues are concerned, this study has shown multiple examples of structural inefficiencies that affect service delivery including media and communication. Issues such as poor service delivery, competition, politics, and corruption have all had a significant contribution to the quality and effectiveness of media and communication initiatives. It is reasonable to say that agency and culture have

not been key considerations when it comes to crafting of media policy, strategies, and initiatives specifically dealing with the pandemic.

Regarding uncertainty as defined by the problematic integration theory, the people's social and economic needs have not been considered to be a part of the overall pandemic media and communication landscape. Pandemic media has tended to focus on how to prevent contracting the Covid-19 virus irrespective of what was at the top of people's concerns, which that study has found included issues like loss of household earnings and school closures. Some structural issues such as thematic funding and what people called copying of western strategies, without analyzing local needs are partly responsible for such an approach. A more holistic approach is needed but can only be realized if the target audiences are given the platform to provide input and effect change to media strategies. Finally, the question of the chaining effect of uncertainty foci, was a concept that people articulated very well showing how the social and economic challenges they were facing were all triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. This chaining phenomenon should be a key consideration in communication because the needs of media audiences are diverse, and this concept makes the connection very clear. This also means that the interaction between media audiences and strategists should be ongoing, and strategies must be nimble to reflect emerging issues and challenges as the pandemic progresses.

Chapter 6: Implications of the Study and Conclusion

Implications of the Study

This study has brought up several findings that have implications on the study and application of risk communication primarily in Lilongwe Malawi, but these findings could also be relevant in other similar settings. Theoretically, the study has looked at the culture centered approach theory as the lens for assessing the role of media audiences in risk communication and thus the relevance and effectiveness of current media and communication approaches. In addition, this study has also explored the concept of uncertainty in this pandemic following the definition provided by the problematic integration theory. In a supplementary manner, the study has also looked at indigenous knowledge systems including *Ubuntu* which is a community organizing philosophy among the *Bantu* people of central and southern Africa.

Agency

According to the culture centered approach (CCA), the agency of people living on the margins of society must be central in any media and communication undertaking that will target those people. The implication of this is that if those on the margins are allowed to participate, it means that by extension everyone is allowed to participate. Therefore, if such participation does take place, then evidence that audience members have participated in the media initiatives should exist among mainstream audience members. This study did not find evidence of any deliberate efforts to centralize the agency of marginalized audiences in the Covid-19 pandemic media and communication strategies and initiatives. On the contrary, respondents drawn from the potential audience for media

initiatives indicated that they had not had any interactions with media experts on the pandemic. While this study in itself may not be conclusive that there was no participation, the responses from media experts support the finding that there was minimal audience participation. The media experts referenced pretesting of materials, phone-in radio programs and participation in mobile cinema shows examples of participatory media. Additional studies both quantitative and qualitative are required to fully assess the level of participation in media and communication during the pandemic, especially in rural areas.

Culture

The other construct of CCA that was also central to this study is culture, which is considered as the context for local people's orientation to information in terms of values, principles, rituals, beliefs, as well ontological and epistemological aspects. The relationship between communication for development (which is the framework through which media and communication is enacted) and culture is complicated. This complicated history also came out during this study, which was conducted in the capital city Lilongwe. The respondents in this study referred to rural areas as places where people need to be civic educated about many aspects of the pandemic, suggesting widespread ignorance among the rural population. Even media experts also expressed similar sentiments about culture which is in line with earlier perceptions of culture as a barrier to development within the study of C4D. However contemporary mainstream development communication does not argue that culture is a barrier, even though the old sentiment is still persistent on the ground.

It would not be correct to say that culture is just seen in a negative light because this study also revealed an understanding that people have about their values and ways of living as being unique and different. An example of this is the respondents' critique of the way media was communicating about the pandemic, where the respondents felt that Malawi was simply copying western approaches. Two respondents cited the use of fear inducing messages during the pandemic as indicative of the western approach to communication. They argued that Malawian audiences would not elicit the same responses to these kind of messages as western audiences.

In addition to the critique above, some respondents also felt that there was an overreliance on scientific methods in how media was communicating about the pandemic. This rejection of science as the only basis for media strategizing and implementation highlights the fact that there are other considerations that are equally important. However apart from the obvious need for dialogue between audiences and media practitioners, more needs to be done to fully represent the voice of the people. One aspect that needs to change is the overreliance on a top-down science-based approach to communication. Although this made sense in the early days of the pandemic when the focus was on communicating the facts as quickly as possible, there is no justification to continue using a top-down approach as the pandemic has evolved. Cultural values, local ways of knowing and local ways of learning should all be central to how the media communicates in a pandemic. Systemic factors dealing with funding, international recommendations, and all other system related factors that stifle local voices must be rationalized by media experts. In addition, more studies should be undertaken to establish

practical steps on how culture can be centralized in media strategies during a pandemic.

The studies should look at indigenous knowledge systems such as *Ubuntu* and how such indigenous philosophies can be made an integral part of risk communication strategy and initiatives.

Structure

The third construct according to CCA theory is structure and, in this study, structural issues have been raised which are in line with the theory as structures are conceptualized as inhibiting to audience agency in the context of their culture. The antagonistic nature of structure to real participation by marginalized people as theorized in CCA was reflected in the findings of this study. The first issue raised was that the government and its communication machinery were not visiting communities to have dialogue on the pandemic and to answer pertinent questions. The respondents framed such discussions and answers to their questions as critical pieces of information that were needed to help them make decisions on key practices such as seeking vaccination. Indeed, as highlighted in previous sections, this request was in line with local epistemologies but contrary to scientific recommendations from the WHO and other international bodies. Banning all groupings of people was a sound science driven decision, but it was also one that denied people a meaningful way of communication with their leaders, and this created more problems than it addressed. It was therefore not a coincidence to see a major focus on traditional mass media, particularly radio because of the banning of groupings and closure of public spaces.

The second issue that was also reported by respondents as affecting communication between the authorities and the people was the issue of corruption by public officials and the related exaggeration of the pandemic. The perception of corruption and other financial malpractices, such as the motivation to create jobs among public officials, was a significant barrier to the reception of pandemic messages by the public. In addition, the publishing of infection and recovery numbers was also seen by some of the respondents as nothing less than a justification for additional funding from foreign organizations. These respondents were of the view that the pandemic was not a big problem, but it was being exaggerated because the government and non-governmental organizations stood to benefit from the potential increased funding to fight the pandemic. Instances of corruption were reported at the time including through Malawi's leading online news platform, Nyasatimes.com, even though many of those accused in such reports were later exonerated. However, the coverage of corruption in the media coupled with people's experiences with public services and prevailing sentiments gave the impression of a very corrupt system that failed to deliver during the pandemic. This perception was a barrier to effective communication even as reported by respondents to this study.

Therefore, additional studies should be done to measure the effect of corruption, including the perception of corruption on media and communication in a health emergency. Additionally, this study should be situated in a rural setting where media options and access are limited mostly to radio, and hence easier to assess how corruption affects people's reception of official messages.

The third significant aspect of the structure construct that came up during this study was politics, both national and international politics, which respondents felt had a direct impact on media and communication during the pandemic. Regarding local politics, the onset of the pandemic coincided with political upheaval in Malawi, including the cancelation of the presidential elections of 2019 by the constitutional court. This politicized the pandemic messaging bringing into question the very reality of the pandemic. With the existence of the pandemic itself being a contested topic, it was very difficult for the government to implement prevention and mitigation measures. Indeed the government did try to institute lockdown measures which were ruled to be illegal by the courts after some citizens had sued the government against such measures (Tengatenga et al., 2021). So, in terms of media and communication, those who supported the government were inclined to believe that the pandemic is real, and restrictions were necessary. On the other hand, those who were affiliated with the opposition parties did not believe that the pandemic was real, but that it was a tactic by the government to disrupt campaigning by the opposition. Consequently, since the opposition won the rescheduled elections by 59%, it can be argued that more than half the country was opposed to the pandemic restrictions and messaging.

The other aspect of politics was the international travel restrictions that primarily targeted Africans especially those who had received the AstraZeneca vaccine, as well as in the immediate aftermath of South African scientists identifying the Omicron variant. It was surprising to respondents in this study to hear that vaccinated Africans were being denied entry into European countries even though the vaccines are manufactured in

Europe. Some respondents felt that it was simply a manifestation of racist tendencies, and that the pandemic was nothing more than a convenient excuse to stop Africans from entering European countries. This feeling was further exacerbated by the discovery of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus by researchers in South Africa. The respondents felt that instead of celebrating the exploits of the South African scientists, the country along with 7 other southern African countries including Malawi, was placed on a travel restriction list. This surprised some of the respondents who felt that Africa was being punished for its success, so that the story was no longer about the exploits of the scientists but the punishment in the form of travel restrictions. While this sentiment was surprising to me, coming from respondents to this study, I felt that their access to, and preference for social media, exposes them to broader conversations about race and xenophobia than I thought. It is important to have additional studies to better understand the influence of local and international politics on media in a pandemic context.

With regard to local politics, I would recommend a study on the role of local politics on media coverage and influence on public health emergencies especially in a similar context in Malawi. The key question as far as I am concerned is how the media responds to a conflict between political messaging and public health emergency recommendations, especially when the two contradict each other. With regard to international politics, I would recommend a study on the role of social media in shaping local opinions about public health emergencies and the role of foreign entities including international organizations.

Uncertainty

This study has found that uncertainty is a very important concept that should be taken into consideration as recommended by various scholars, particularly as defined by the problematic integration theory. One of the goals of PI is to focus on the ubiquity of communication. Indeed, the singular focus of media on health aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic at the expense of other perspectives made such media initiatives less relevant. As a matter of fact, respondents to this study reported worrying about other aspects of life that had nothing to do with the fear of Covid-19 infection, instead it was the social and economic factors that came about as a result of the pandemic. Respondents to this study reported worrying about school closures and how that would affect the wellbeing of their children. They also worried about the loss of household income as businesses and companies were forced to shut down because of pandemic restrictions. However, these other triggers of uncertainty were not part of the media and communication initiatives during the pandemic, even though they were salient among the people.

As discussed in earlier chapters, there are reasons that explain this omission, including funding, but this also highlights the top-down nature of risk communication during the pandemic. The question that still remains unanswered is how to integrate the ever-changing sources of stress and worry into predetermined communication agendas. One important action would be to document people's experiences during the pandemic so as to understand the communicative issues that have impacted their lives but have not been dealt with through the formal media initiatives. Additionally, a study on how the

pandemic has affected people can also highlight the key challenges that people have faced and thus show what is relevant communicatively for different audience groups.

Another important aspect of uncertainty that has also come out of this study is the chaining effect which comes about when one source or foci of uncertainty triggers another. Several respondents have narrated how Covid-19 is the trigger that has led to business closures, which then led to job and income losses. Not only were respondents making the connections between the pandemic and socio-economic effects at household level, but they were also able to make the connections between Malawi as a country and its challenges in international trade. This demonstrates a level of sophistication that audiences have towards the pandemic, and a capacity to process complex communication. This may explain the frustration that was expressed by the media respondent to this study, concerning the use of 60 second advertising style radio and television spots as the core media strategy by the government. Such an approach does not acknowledge people's capacity for in-depth engagement on the pandemic, nor does it respect their desire for deeper conversations. The most immediate consequence of not considering the chaining effect of uncertainty foci is not only that media is based on an incomplete story. More than that, with the evolution of the pandemic, along with changes in people's priorities and needs, the conversations become irrelevant. It is therefore more important during a pandemic to have ongoing serious and in-depth dialogue that evolves with the pandemic

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of communication and media in the context of public health emergencies focusing on the current Covid-19 pandemic in Malawi, specifically in the capital city of Lilongwe. To achieve this objective, I applied two main theories namely the culture centered approach (CCA) and the problematic integration theory (PI). The choice of these two theories was informed by the context in which this study was going to be undertaken i.e., in the global south, specifically in Malawi and in the context of a pandemic. According to Dutta (2016), the culture centered approach promotes the agency of audiences, the preeminence of culture in communication and the deconstruction of structural barriers to communication. This theory also promotes a critical alternative to C4D which is the framework for media and communication that is dominant in developing countries and is promoted and supported by western countries. The PI theory on the other hand, was selected to address the pandemic environment which brings about different dynamics to media and communication context. One of the most important dynamics in an emergency is uncertainty and the PI theory provides a unique understanding to uncertainty as a phenomenon that is formed and experienced entirely through communication (Babrow & Striley, 2014).

According to the literature the main challenge to communication for development (C4D), or communication for behavior and social change or the other iterations of C4D is tokenistic or limited participation by media and communication audiences. And this had been highlighted by different authors such as Dutta, Airhihenbuwa, Ndhlovu, and

Olufowote just to name a few whose works have been used in this study. Intimately connected to this limited contribution by media audiences to the media and communicative efforts is the dismissal of local cultures in favor of western approaches driven by science. This bias towards scientific methods, emphasizes that improving awareness and knowledge are prerequisites for action (Porat et al., 2020). This focus on western scientific methods is rejected by the CCA theory as nothing more than an ideological push to advance the interests of neoliberal development agendas of western capitalism.

The findings to this study are not only in line with the fact that pandemic messaging in Malawi has focused on scientific and western approaches. The findings also highlight the fact that this bias towards scientific and western approaches is one of the key weaknesses to pandemic media strategies. One male respondent argued that Malawi seemed to just be “copying and pasting” its media and communication strategies from western countries without considering the local context. An example of this critique of the government’s approach to media that came up during the study was the use of fear inducing messages. This approach according to the media respondent to this study does not induce the same effect as in western countries where people are jolted into action based on such messages. Instead of eliciting a sense of dread which according to Witte (1994), is a more adaptive response, the messages were simply paralyzing and inducing a fatalistic view to Covid-19. So, fear inducing messages have not worked to stimulate people to action but have had the opposite effect, where people feel that they are going to die anyway hence there is no need to waste time with prevention.

Regarding the focus on scientific messages, it is clear that the same “copy and paste” approach is to blame. It seems that recommendations from the WHO which for the most part were of a biomedical nature, were simply being taken wholesale and sent to broadcasting houses without any adaptation. The issue that was highlighted by a community leader was that the use of scientific terminologies when communicating with local people simply confused people who did not understand the scientific jargon. Even worse, asking local leaders to communicate with their people using these scientific terminologies confused both the leaders and their people as many of them have limited formal education. Therefore, respondents argued that all communications with local leaders and the people at large should be simplified, and all technical jargon should be simplified or eliminated.

As alluded to earlier, CCA theory also argues for the centrality of culture in communication, not just to improve the clarity of messages, but for local people to own the communicative processes and outcomes. Unfortunately, the view of culture in development communication has evolved from being seen as a barrier, to being coopted as a necessary tool that increases acceptance of messages among local audiences. This aligns with the findings of this study where audience input is only sought during pretesting of communication materials or phone in programs on radio or TV. Clearly the media experts are the ones in complete control of the communication agenda and oversee the narrative, as well as the methods of delivery.

Culture is not just about the values that govern everyday life but goes into the ontological and epistemological orientation of the people. Thus, it is not just the

effectiveness of messaging that suffers when culture is ignored. Ultimately, communicating with people in a manner that does not make an intimate connection with the audience can be counterproductive. This study has found that the way communication has been conducted mostly through traditional media, has left many people with unanswered questions. These are not questions that are just meant to address some curiosity, but questions for which people need answers to make critical decisions such as whether to receive vaccination or not. While media experts have focused on communicating through radio and TV, their audiences are asking for in-person conversations to get clarification on issues that are not clear. Such issues include the differences between vaccine and the effectiveness of such vaccines. Not only are audience members asking for in-person engagement, but the urban audiences are also asking for meaningful engagement through social media. They specifically highlighted the social media platforms WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, but it seems that media strategists have not found a way to use these platforms effectively.

The only reported use of social media has been to share electronic copies of posters and brochures with local leaders, with the hope that they will spread them further in their WhatsApp groups. This is so limited in scope, and I believe it is not effective because of the nature of social media as a two-way medium of communication. In addition, social media has also been a source of conspiracy theories and myths that need to be addressed promptly and continually with clear rebuttals and correct information. I feel that the growth of social media has not been well understood by media experts in Malawi. Based on this study, I feel that there is some naivete as to the significance of

social media and a general lack of skills on how to use social media in a pandemic in the public sector which drives pandemic related communication.

Moving on to PI theory and the concept of uncertainty during the pandemic in Malawi, it was already established in the literature review that uncertainty is a very important concept in times of upheavals or emergencies. The fact that uncertainty is experienced communicatively according to the PI theory, made it even more relevant for this study, as the literature also showed that the concept is missing in risk communication. This study found that indeed uncertainty is a very important part of people's experiences in Malawi during the pandemic that in many cases, the main triggers of uncertainty were not directly connected to Covid-19 as a disease. The study also found that uncertainty is largely absent from the formal media and communication initiatives addressing the pandemic, which only focus on biomedical aspects.

This study also found that several important events had significant impact on people's lives, and that even though these were matters of significant priority communicatively, they were not considered part of the overall pandemic communication. In as much as people were worried about contracting the Covid-19 virus, they were even more concerned about losing their jobs, school closures for their children and market closures. According to some of the respondents to this study, these other concerns were even more important in their lives as they were more immediate than the potential of getting infected by Covid-19. According to PI theory, these triggers of uncertainty are called foci, and as far as pandemic media and communication in Malawi is concerned, they were not included in the strategy. While previous studies on uncertainty under PI

theory have focused on individual struggles with chronic illness, this study has looked at uncertainty from a public health perspective, affecting a wider population. While it can still be argued that experiences are idiosyncratic, the triggers of uncertainty are varied even if the primary trigger is Covid-19. At the same time these idiosyncratic experiences are also common, for example many families were affected by school closures, even if they never experienced Covid-19 infection. The experience of having children at home over extended periods was a common experience as well, even though different families had different ways of dealing with school closures.

The idea of dealing with multiple triggers of uncertainty was also explored in this study, and respondents were clear about the connection between multiple foci. For example, at least 10 of the respondents felt that Covid-19 was the source of all the other triggers of uncertainty such as loss of livelihoods. In addition, respondents also narrated how triggers of uncertainty were happening in parallel such as school closures happening while parents also lost jobs. On the other hand, uncertainty foci also occurred in sequence. For example, some respondents reported that when schools were closed, communities observed an increase in teenage pregnancies compared to pre-pandemic times.

The uncertainty foci that people have experienced during the pandemic have been of a magnitude that many people have not experienced before, and many had no idea before 2020 that they would be dealing with challenges of such magnitude. It is therefore baffling that media experts in Malawi would completely omit these struggles from the pandemic media and communication strategy. Somehow media experts expected people

to prioritize Covid-19 prevention and mitigation messages over their other struggles, even if they were triggered by the pandemic. This approach to messaging reflects the absence of people's voices, or the rigidity of media experts to exclude anything that is not connected to the etiology of Covid-19, or both. Whether the media experts made conscious choices to omit the other aspects of the pandemic in the media strategies or not, the outcome is the same. The media and communication packages were woefully incomplete and, in some cases, irrelevant, considering that they were not addressing the salient issues in the lives of audience members. Media and communication experts must develop strategies, priorities, materials, and approaches that address the totality of pandemic experiences and not just the biomedical aspects.

This glaring omission of relevant issues in media and communication packages is not because media experts are oblivious to such issues in society, but they work in a system that does not incentivize deviations. Waisbord (2015) captured this conundrum very well when he said, "The perennial urgency of programs, busy delivering quarterly reports, securing funding and diligently responding to donors, is disconnected from the haphazard, uncertain march of collective action" (p.157). This is a structural issue, which currently responds to the needs of donors and not the needs of audiences, and thus the top-down approach to risk communication continues. And this is why critics argue that community participation in C4D as well as risk communication is just tokenistic because it is simply designed to aid the realization of donor results.

Answering Research Questions

On the question of audience participation in the design and implementation of risk communication, this study has found that there is very limited participation, and not just because of Covid-19 restrictions. As indicated earlier, Malawi did not institute nationwide lockdowns, but had targeted lockdowns for institutions such as schools and marketplaces, so opportunities for communication were not curtailed. Media experts who participated in this study, talked about seeking audience input when pretesting communication materials, as well as seeking input through phone in programs on radio and TV. It is not clear whether this input has any effect on media strategies and approaches, even though it may be used to influence some content adjustments. On the other hand, audience members who responded to this study were unequivocal in saying that they have never participated in pandemic media and communication initiatives. While this may not be representative of all people in Lilongwe, it is still telling that none of the respondents had participated in any such initiatives.

There are opportunities for audiences to participate in media and communication that media experts have not utilized. For example, respondents clearly highlighted social media platforms especially Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram as their preferred sources of information on the pandemic. They spoke about participating in various WhatsApp groups where information is shared by friends, colleagues, and family members within those groups. The challenge is that media experts who are responsible for communicating about the pandemic, have not prioritized social media, thinking that it is not a big platform. However, while Malawi still has infrastructure challenges including

electricity and internet connectivity, social media is a rapidly growing platform that should not be ignored. This is especially the case in urban areas where issues of connectivity are not as significant and where smartphone ownership is very high.

In addition to social media there are other less technological approaches that have been mentioned in the study, specifically indigenous methods of communication which have been used to communicate since time immemorial. While mainstream media discourse focuses on communication that is aided by technology, there is an argument to be made about what media should be in resource poor settings like Malawi. In fact, Airhihenbuwa and Obregon (2000) make a similar argument when they talk about a redefinition of what is considered media in the African context to include folklore, storytelling, and other oral channels. These are media that are functional whether there is a pandemic or not and conversations are taking place except that media experts are not privy to such conversations. To be clear, the media expert from the government who participated in this study, highlighted the importance of indigenous media as one way of improving the effectiveness of pandemic media. Therefore, indigenous media should be a central part of pandemic related media and communication strategies and initiatives.

Having said that, it is not simply the use of indigenous media that will make communication better, but it is the respect of indigenous knowledge systems that can make a difference. Respecting indigenous knowledge systems is not just a noble gesture, but it allows for a deep understanding of local values and ways of living which includes ways of communicating. Even though media experts highlighted the need for indigenous methods of communicating, they are also part of the reason why such methods are seen as

counterproductive and undesirable. According to Muwanga-Zake (2009), educated Africans who are in charge of media and communication strategizing and implementation are trained in an education system suffering from a legacy of colonialism. As a result, these media experts unwittingly perpetuate colonial fallacies about the inferiority of indigenous ways of communication. Therefore, it is not simply a question of changing media strategies and approaches, but there is need for a change in mindset. And this study highlights this need as articulated by some respondents who called for a move away from western ways of communication, and to embrace Malawian methods which are primarily face-to-face in nature.

One of the most important philosophical foundations of indigenous knowledge systems in central and southern Africa is the concept of *ubuntu* which is very important if one is to understand the value system that affects communication. Some of the core values of *Ubuntu* are respect, generosity, consensus, and mutual care (Geber & Keane, 2013). Indeed, methods of communication including folklore, songs, dances, and proverbs are all part of the rich tapestry of the collective *Ubuntu* way of communicating. These values and approaches to communication should be integrated into pandemic media to make it more relevant, and to heighten a sense of ownership.

The absence of these values can lead to a loss of trust between the government as the main communicating body and the people as the audience, thus rendering such media efforts ineffective. This point in the opening sentence is a paraphrased point that was raised by one respondent when discussing the absence of in-person forums with government officials. The inability of communicators to meet with people in person to

address matters of interest and to respond to questions was seen as a lack of respect and interest.

One of the issues that demonstrates this lack of trust is the issue of corruption which came out prominently during the study, largely because of the social distance between media experts and their audiences. This social distance that is perpetuated by the absence of face-to-face interactions and dialogue has created discord among the population who believe that government officials are motivated by self-aggrandizement. They believe that the pandemic is not as serious as it is projected, and that these government officials benefit from exaggerating the pandemic because that attracts funding for their activities. It may be true that there are cases of localized corruption that have taken place, and this can be true in any part of the world, but some of the examples given in this study show that this is largely a perception issue. For example, one respondent talked about a case of someone who died of Covid-19, but the relatives of the deceased were saying that the man also had asthma. The respondent concluded that because the government did not highlight the asthma as a potential cause of death, then they were simply ruling all deaths as being caused by Covid-19.

Another issue that also highlights the lack of trust between the government and the people is the issue of religious inspired fatalism such as the issue of “the mark of the beast” which is found in the biblical book of revelation. To be clear the issue of the mark of the beast or 666 is not unique to Malawi, but it is very salient in a country that is predominantly Christian with a growing section of evangelical Christianity. The argument that these Christian believers were making is that anybody who accepts to be

vaccinated, was accepting to receive the mark of the beast. According to respondents, the book of revelation says that in the last days people will be required to have this mark of the beast to be allowed to conduct any transaction. However, this mark of the beast will mean a rejection of God and thus it must be avoided. The government of Malawi has tried to address this issue through its bureaucrats, but one of the respondents to this study, a community leader, questioned this approach because government bureaucrats are not equipped to deal with such matters. According to this respondent, issues of dogma are better handled by religious leaders who are better equipped to handle those issues. So, while the government reached out to religious communities, their outreach was simply to provide key messages to the religious leaders, and not to have serious dialogue about their role in dealing with such issues. Therefore, religious leaders and other community leaders should be part and parcel of any pandemic related media and communication strategies and approaches.

As far as the question of uncertainty is concerned, as has been outlined earlier, any media and communication strategy that does not incorporate uncertainty is incomplete. While the concept itself is complicated because of its dynamism and ever-changing forms and foci, it is a phenomenon that is uniquely communicative in nature. And while other studies have focused on individual struggles with uncertainty as a result of an individual health condition like cancer, this study has highlighted a different aspect to uncertainty. Due to the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent mitigation measures, a public health pandemic triggered social and economic challenges that are not ordinarily connected to public health. The closure of key services and businesses had

both direct and indirect effects that were major causes of uncertainty among the population. While people were dealing with both the disease and the upheavals that were brought about by the mitigation measures in their own ways, the difference with other literature is that the triggers for uncertainty were common and happened simultaneously. In a way, these uncertainties were experienced by communities rather than individuals. Some of the examples that were shared by respondents to this study were funerals and weddings, which are community events that were affected by the banning of all gatherings. In addition, in the early days of the pandemic funerals for Covid-19 deaths were completely banned and were being handled by health officials which denied communities the ability to perform traditional funeral rites for their loved ones. In view of the ever-changing nature of the pandemic and its mitigation measures, it is important to have robust and ongoing dialogue with communities to reflect their needs in media initiatives. These needs will likely vary from place to place and therefore the media strategies and approaches need to be nimble and reflect those realities.

Finally, the chaining of uncertainty foci has also been established in this study and respondents clearly articulated the connections and interrelationships between Covid-19 and the other foci that emerged out of the mitigation measures. Respondents to this study understood the role of Covid-19 as the main trigger for travel restrictions, business, and school closures, and they had personal stories about how they were affected. One respondent narrated how the closure of schools affected his family, whose main source of income was operating a private school. So, the closure of schools affected the family income as their only source of revenue was taken away from them. While this may be a

unique case, others were more straightforward. Many people who worked in the hospitality industry lost their jobs because of the travel restrictions that were instituted to control the pandemic. These experiences with multiple concurrent uncertainty foci, as well as sequential experiences highlight the fact that in a pandemic there are many issues and challenges that need to be addressed beyond the disease itself. Media and communication strategies and approaches that fail in this regard will be at best incomplete, or even irrelevant for people who are living through such experiences.

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