Research Article

Ghanaian Journalists and The Spread of Rumors During the Covid19 Pandemic: Views from Five Regions

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the role of Ghanaian journalists in disseminating rumors, misinformation, and disinformation during the Covid19 pandemic. Additionally, the study investigates how this information was transmitted and spread among journalists, as well as the motivating factors behind their actions. The participants in the study were purposely selected from five administrative regions of Ghana that had a lower uptake of COVID-19 vaccines, as classified by the Ghana Health Services. The findings of the study indicate that journalists played a significant role in spreading disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana. The interviewees in this study attributed this to various reasons, such as parochial and partisan interests, lack of information, deliberate attempts to force verification, and pressure associated with the job.

The study concludes that the involvement of journalists in the spread of rumors about the COVID-19 pandemic and related issues can be attributed to the liberalized nature of the media space in Ghana with its excessive commercialization and rush for breaking news. This competition for news has led many journalists to neglect due diligence and professional ethics in sourcing and disseminating information to the public. This study highlights the need for policymakers to establish effective measures for regulating the ethics and standards of journalism in line with the relevant constitutional provisions and democratic practice.

Keywords: COVID-19, Rumor, Social-Media, Misinformation, Disinformation, Ghana, Media, Journalists

Introduction

In early 2020, the novel human virus: The outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) caused a worldwide public health crisis, with Covid19 becoming the official name for the disease it causes (Ai et al. 2021). However, the pandemic also triggered an overflow of information, much of which was unreliable and spread rapidly, complicating the management of the crisis, particularly given the prevalence of the internet and social media in the current information age [1-3]. As a critical institution in crisis management, the media provides a two-way channel for the dissemination of information between governance institutions and citizens. In liberal democracies like Ghana, a thriving media space allows for the easy flow of information. In March 2020, when Ghana officially entered lockdown mode, President Nana Akufo Addo began periodically addressing the nation about the government's efforts to contain the situation and win public support to forge a united front in managing the pandemic [4].

The literature on rumors suggests that they are prevalent in both industrialized and traditional societies. Rumor spreading is a common method for information dissemination within and among networks in every society. Social psychology defines a rumor as a story, news information or statement circulating in the public domain without confirmation or certainty of facts [5]. As a result, rumors, like insults or taboos, arise in situations of ambiguity or ambivalence [6]. Rumors occur when there is little clarity on an issue, information is not readily available, or people feel an acute need for security [7]. Consequently, rumors are a powerful, pervasive, and persistent force that affects individuals and groups [8, 9]. The simplicity of implementing rumors and their effectiveness makes them relevant for studying to understand their effect on aspects of societal relations [10]. In this study, the term rumor is used to refer the propagation of false or unverified information through social media or digital platforms in any form that mimics accurate news.

Since Ghana's return to constitutional rule in 1993, the nation's media landscape has grown significantly, with hundreds of media outlets now available throughout the country [11]. This expansion has positioned the media as a key player in the dissemination of information, making it accessible even in remote areas. This

is especially the case among people without access to digital technology or internet data, people who are not literate in the language of many digital platforms [12]. Digital media access and use continues to rise around the world. In developing countries such as Ghana, the digital divide is wide between urban and rural dwellers and along economic and social status. Also, digital literacy is lacking and continues to undermine access and use, especially for people in rural communities. Indeed, majority of the population still lacks digital literacy [13]. This divide is reflected across several sectors of the digital economy, including the health sector [13, 14].

A lack of access to digital technologies, platforms, and literacy skills creates information deserts in an increasingly digitized world, depriving community members of the opportunity to find credible information. Even for those who have access to these platforms, misinformation and disinformation continue to hinder the dissemination of reliable health information. For instance, WhatsApp, one of the most popular communication mediums across Africa and Ghana, has recently been flooded with fake news on topics ranging from education to health and politics [13]. Although some young college students were able to access COVID-19 health information via the Internet, a significant portion of the Ghanaian population lacks access to digital platforms [13, 14]. Despite the evolving nature of Ghana's media landscape, there is a general dearth in media literacy. Hence, a plausible framework for unpacking the spread of rumor among journalist in the country is medial literacy. This would be discussed in the next section.

Despite the growth in traditional news media and channels, digital platforms were equally used to provide COVID-19 information for the information needs of Ghanaians during the pandemic. This study examines the spread of rumors about COVID-19 among a cross-section of Ghanaian journalists on social media. It focuses on the forms and mediums of misinformation circulating among this group of professionals. The study is a collaboration between UNICEF and Fact Space West Africa, with the aim of providing evidence required to better handle communication, among others during health crises in the country.

2.0 Critical Medial Literacy – a Theoretical Discussion
Critical Media Literacy like many other concepts defies a standard definition. It is generally defined and applied to reflect the standpoint of researchers and practitioners. According to Luke, the concept can be defined as "the ability to produce one's own multimedia texts" [15]. This definition can be particularly used to classify the traditional perspective of media literacy studies. However, from the literature on cultural studies, critical media literacy relates to how the politics of a particular society shapes the production and dissemination of media works to enhance the course or activity of a section of society against the other [16]. According to postmodern scholars, critical media literacy refers to how persons produce or take up texts differently, depending on their interests or biases on various political and social issues within a context [17]. Also, when we critically apply a feminist pedagogical lens to understanding media literacy, attention is paid to how popular culture and textual production functions to re-produce relations of power and gendered identities to aid the learning of individuals during their daily activities for resistance or to assert a particular claim [18-20]. From the various perspective, it can be deduced that media literacy essentially relates to the production and dissemination of news items from the perspective of a person's ideological, social, and political biases to champion a parochial or group's course of action for diverse reasons.

With the advent of Web 2.0 platforms or digital media tools, the concept of media literacy has increased in popularity and applied variously to issue promotion or education among others in the past decade. In this sense, media literacy is associated with how the media influence knowledge and attitudes of the consuming public. However, in many instances, the media is a conveyer of misinformation or disinformation. As such, information is churned out for various reasons. This in turn poses a general risk to the public, irrespective of the type of mis or dis information being produced and shared. Particularly as the media holds enormous influence on how persons engage to negotiate the consumption or meaning associated with a message. This is either by accepting, questioning and, or challenging the inherent biases being asserted to, or portrayed by a media personality or organization [21-23]. Still, research exits to suggest how various cognitive biases, such as partisan ideology influences rumors and misinformation [24]. Likewise, in their study on misinformation, concluded that consumers of news harbored "how worldview can override fact" and where there was a correction to such dis/misinformation, they exhibited "copious inability to update their memories in light of corrective information" (p. 123)n [25]. This evidence emphasizes the strong effect of personal biases individuals can hold to cause the production and circulation of misinformation, and the feel-good factor that it exudes. The use of digital media platforms to correct such false claims in the public domain can be of great importance in sanitizing the information loop and the accurateness of messages conveyed to the public.

Digital media literacy is grounded in the idea that liberal democratic regimes thrive on an informed citizenry to enhance democratic practice. Therefore, the ultimate objective of digital media literacy is to give citizens the necessary, accurate information to enable them to make an informed decisions in relation to their surroundings. However, the consuming public remains vulnerable to the production and dissemination of rumors, misinformation, or disinformation. Hence, understanding the relationship between digital media literacy and the spread of rumors, misinformation, or disinformation helps to bring more clarity to digital media literacy. This is helpful as it helps researchers, media practitioners and policy makers to evolve means to dispel the increasing menace of misinformation and disinformation given the increasing liberalization of the media space in developing democratic countries such as Ghana. Given that the spread of rumors, misinformation, or disinformation is in many ways rooted in biases in processing and dissemination of information. In this article, the reference to digital media literacy is used broadly, and understood to mean forms of public engagement in the analysis of the accuracy of

media information, either textual or imagery, verbal or visual.

3.0 The Spread of Rumors in Society

The study of information dissemination in social networks is important and involves a wide range of questions, from ranging technological aspects to the spread of viruses and the diffusion of ideas in human communities. Previous studies have explored the spread of rumors and misinformation, aiming to quantify the credibility of a piece of information or to detect an outbreak of misinformation [26, 27]. With the increasing popularity of online social networks and their potential to propagate information, the spread of rumor or misinformation is on the increase (see Linden, Panagopoulos, and [28-30]. Hence the internet and social media space has become a potent avenue for the increasing spread of rumors, fake news, or misinformation in society. The term 'rumor' has several definitions, depending on whether a piece of information is verified or unverified at the time of circulation. To gain more insight into these and other related questions, researchers have devoted a lot of attention to studying generative models for social networks [9, 31, 32]. Existing research on rumors has focused on their definitions, causes, influencing factors, and consequences [33]. However, this research has overlooked the study of the characteristics of rumors spreading through social or professional networks with a diverse or homogenous composition that has direct interaction with the populace. Rumor spreading carries significant potential to affect personal lives, twist scientific information, and influence public opinion on issues. According to Wang et al. the spread of rumors and their effects on society in contemporary times have led to what can be described as the 'post-truth era' due to the rise of new media or Web 2.0 communication platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram [31].

According to a research report, as of January 2020, Ghana had approximately six million registered active social media users, up from 5.8 million in 2019, with WhatsApp being the most widely used social media platform [34]. This underscores the utility of social media as both a source of information, and avenue for circulating news in Ghana. As a result, social media has redefined how a section of Ghanaians access information, making it the preferred medium for disseminating all types of content with the widest possible reach, especially through Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram.

The widespread adoption of mobile social network platforms and technological advancements have led to significant increases in both the quantity and rate of production and dissemination of information in various forms. However, this has also led to the rapid spread of misinformation, with people increasingly turning to social media for information sharing. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has played a critical role in how public institutions disseminate information and manage the crisis globally. In Ghana, for example, the government used social media to engage with the public during the lockdown in March 2020 by providing weekly updates on the country's strategies to contain the virus [4].

Unfortunately, social media has also become a frequent platform for spreading rumors and misinformation. A growing number of people spend a considerable amount of time on social media platforms as an alternative source of information on various topics [35, 36]. However, most users do not consider the credibility of the information they consume on these platforms, leading to the spread of myths, misconceptions, and misinformation [37]. Some recent studies suggest social media platforms have been used for conducting 'rumor surveillance' in public health to reverse the hindering, uptake, and impact of health interventions, especially during crisis situations [38, 39]. Given the potential of social media to either impede or facilitate behavioral change practices, there is a need for crisis communication to strategically optimize the use of these Web 2.0 tools [39]. The present explanatory study contributes to the existing literature on COVID-19-related dis or misinformation using information shared by a cross-section of Ghanaian journalist from their experiential knowledge – truth learned from personal experience with COVID-19-related handling of information.

4.0 Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how and why Covid-19 rumors, misinformation, and disinformation spread among journalists in Ghana. The study employed focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather data from journalists in five out of the sixteen administrative regions of Ghana, including Ashanti, Central, North East, Upper East, and Volta. These regions were selected by Ghana Health Services because they had lower uptake of COVID-19 vaccines compared to other regions in the country. The definition of a journalist used in this study was a person who works in a media house and disseminates COVID-19-related information as part of their duties. To ensure a diverse sample, the researchers used a maximum variation sampling technique, which considered the quality of journalism, type of media, diverse media platforms (traditional and digital outlets), editors, and regional correspondents from leading news outlets [40]. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ghana Institute of Journalism, the country's leading journalism training institution, on April 10, 2022. The analysis in this study engaged selected quotable remarks from respondents in the FGDs to achieve what scholars of qualitative research refer to as 'data reduction' to make sure we selected the most relevant examples. Hence, from the qualitative tradition— this social scientific approach to using views of respondents is to ensure the most poignant and representative comments are selected for best "fit" to illustrate relevant points in constructing arguments in such studies [41].

Participants for the study were recruited through GhanaFact – a fact-checking organization based in Ghana with personal contacts to news editors in each region where the study was conducted. News editors were contacted by phone and asked to select journalists within their media house who had covered COVID-19 in their reporting. Some snowballing was also used to identify other participants [42]. All potential participants were contacted by phone and the purpose of the study was explained. Participants were asked for their consent, willingness to participate, and availability.

If a participant was available and willing to participate, they were given the time and the place for the focus group discussion (FGD). A total of 150 study participants were contacted, and 111 agreed to participate. Two FGDs were held in each of the Five regions with each group consisting of between 9 and 12 persons. The graphical representations below show the disaggregation of participating journalists and types of media organizations.

Age	Frequency	Educational background	Frequency	Geographical background	Frequency
18-25	13	Primary		Upper East	20
26-31	31	Junior High		Central region	20
32-36	35	Senior High	4	Ashanti	20
37-41	15	Tertiary	96	North East	20
42-46	2			Volta	20
46 and above	4				

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents and distribution of media organization for the study

Private	Public	Radio	TV	Print	Digital
80%	20%	50%	20%	10%	20%

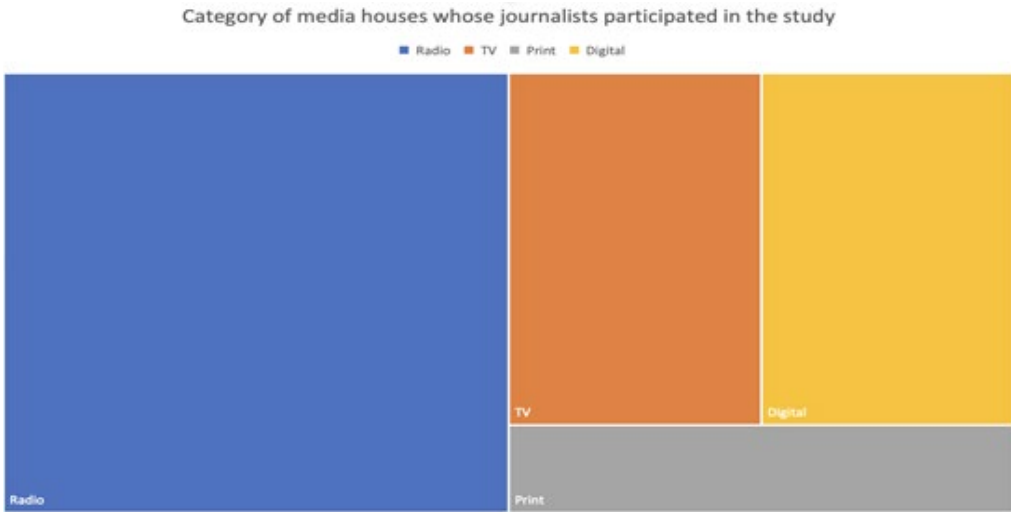**Table 2:** Characteristics of Media Houses sampled

Figure 1: Categorization of journalists by the media houses sampled for this study.

An interview guide with semi-structured and open-ended questions was developed and pilot-tested with a group of ten journalists. The guide was adjusted based on feedback. It consisted of a group exercise in which the FGD participants listed sources of rumors and rated their trust towards those sources. This was followed by a more traditional FGD discussion guide with open-ended and semi-structured interview questions. All FGDs started with written consent and were conducted by an experienced moderator and note-taker who were trained to use the question guides. The moderator used probing to elicit insights from the discussions, and the note taker was responsible for recording the data. Field notes were entered into a shared Google document. FGDs were conducted in April 2022, in the North East, Upper East, Ashanti, Central and Volta regions, with an initial pilot conducted in the Greater Accra region. All FGDs were conducted in English and lasted between 30 to 40 minutes per session.

All FGDs were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by members of the research team with previous experience in transcribing. To ensure transcription quality, two editors were assigned to verify the transcriptions. Data analysis was based on thematic analysis, which began with a familiarization process in which the analyst read the data to obtain an overall understanding of it. Inductive coding and categorization were used to address the research questions. The coding was organized in an Excel sheet that allowed for comparisons across the dataset. In the final stage, the analyst made an interpretation that produced a set of themes [43]. The analysis also included the production of numerical data by examining the most common sources of rumors and the most trusted sources of information. SPSS software was used in the process.

5.0 Results
5.1 Types of Rumors

The study respondents reported several rumors that could be classified into eight categories. The first category consisted of age-related rumors. For instance, many people believe that the COVID-19 virus will kill individuals over the age of 40 and that if one is in that age group and takes the vaccine, they will not live long.

The second category pertained to political propaganda-related rumors. Some participants claimed that the vaccine can sway Ghanaians' voting decisions towards a particular political party. For example, some participants heard rumors that the vaccine could alter a person's mind, causing them to support the ruling political party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP). The third category consisted of health-related rumors. Some respondents stated that taking the vaccine would cause infertility. Others claimed that after receiving the vaccine, one would become unable to give birth. Additionally, some individuals suggested that the vaccine could cause COVID-19 infection. In addition, some people believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a conspiracy orchestrated by white people to reduce the world's population and make money out of it. Regarding rumors specific to Ghana, some believed that Covid-19 was an imported disease that did not originate in the country.

There were also religious-related rumors about the vaccination to curb the contagious effect of COVID-19. According to some of the respondents, some person within their network held the belief that the vaccination process against the COVID-19 pandemic was a sign of the end time – the 'anti-Christ' or '666-Christian belief'. As a result, they believed that vaccination was introduced in fulfilment of the Christian doomsday narrative. Others believed that the pandemic was God's wrath or punishment upon China where the virus was first reported because of "the things they do". Another type of rumor was those Western powers or developed nations had introduced the virus as meant "to fight their enemy countries". This led some to believe the outbreak of the virus and the subsequent vaccination was a deployment of a "biological weapon from China to fight America". Others believed that it was a commercial conspiracy to help certain individuals or businesses make money.

Rumor	Frequency	Percentage
Age-related rumors	3	3.37
Political propaganda-related rumors	5	5.62
Health-related rumors	14	15.73
Conspiracy theory rumors	25	28.09
Ghana-centric rumors	8	8.99
Religious-related rumors	11	12.36
Western powers/ developing nations rumors	15	16.85
Racial- or regional-related rumors	8	8.99
Total	89	100%

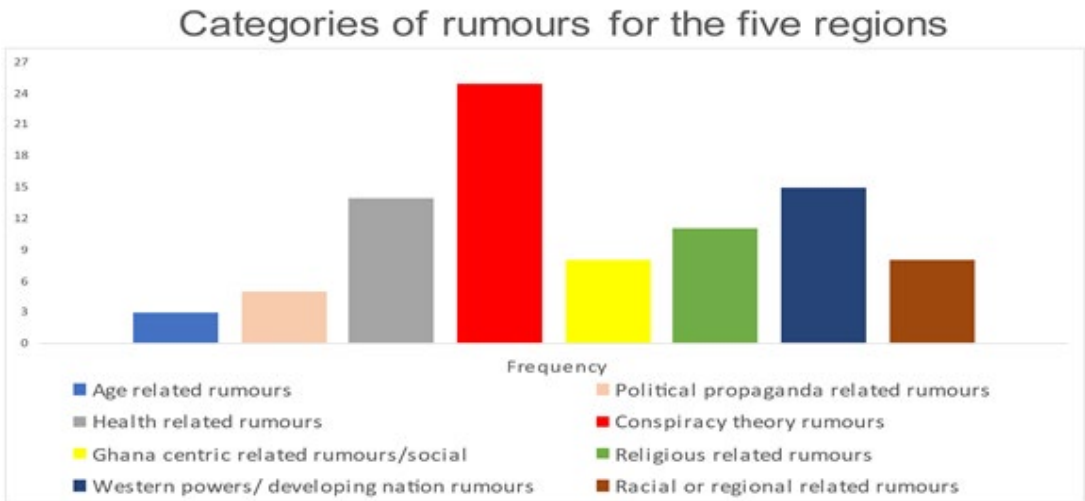**Table 3: Categorization of rumors across five regions of Ghana**

Figure 2: Categories of rumors from the 5 regions studied.

5.2 How Rumors Travel Among Journalists

The focus group participants shared various sources and channels they used to further communicate rumors during the pandemic. The results indicate that WhatsApp was the most common medium of rumors, followed by the community. In addition, participants mentioned getting rumors from pastors, churches, or other religious sources. Political parties or politicians were also identified as mediums through which Covid-19-related rumors traveled.
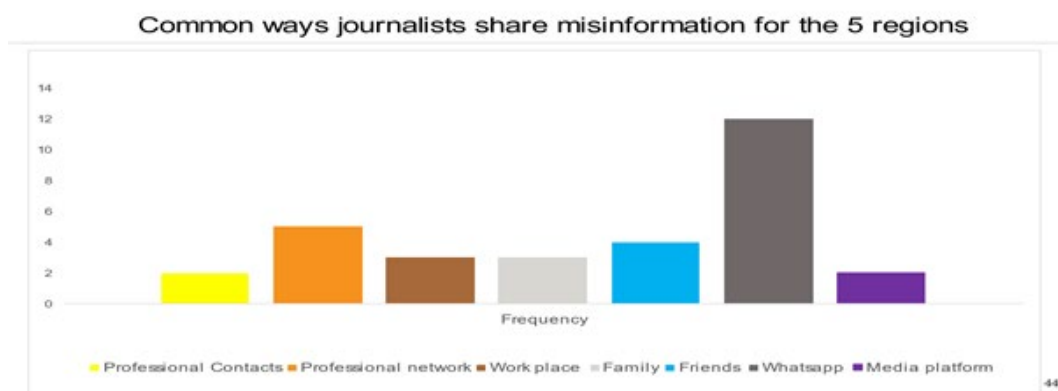

Figure 3: How Rumors Spread among Journalists

WhatsApp

Rumors about how COVID-19 is used for population control were mostly shared on WhatsApp, as individual journalists assessed the threat levels against the public interest. Some respondents interviewed for this study claimed they had no 'particular' reason to conclude on the veracity of the information but felt what they saw in the videos was troubling enough to share with the public. One respondent said, "The few that I think were reliable, I shared on WhatsApp platforms that I belong to." Others mentioned that rumors were shared on WhatsApp to see if other users or public officials had any knowledge or information about the shared content to contradict, falsify or confirm.

Other Social Media Channels

Social media platforms specifically mentioned included YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter were identified as prominent mediums for the spread of suspicious claims. During the discussion, it was clear that videos were a powerful medium for rumors. This is not surprising due to the impactful nature of visuals and moving images, which can evoke emotions and feelings in recipients.

Community, Family, and Friends

When participants referred to "community," they were making a generalization about information that appeared to be widespread but without any concrete idea of its origin. This referred to friends and people they interacted with in the community during their daily activities such as the marketplace, drinking bars, and food vendors.

The family was also another area where rumors were shared, particularly those related to health, impotency, population control and conspiracy theories. Participants mostly shared these rumors with parents and family members they felt close to. For example, one respondent said they shared the rumor with their elder brother, who was a nurse, to seek clarity on the matter. Another respondent shared it with a Catholic priest because they believed they would receive the best religious advice.

Colleagues

Some participants shared rumors with colleagues because they had seen videos of people dressed in white coats who identified themselves as medical practitioners. They shared the information because they believed it was coming from people within the health industry and advised their friends to be cautious and follow whatever the scientists recommended.

Religious Entities

Religious communities were also a common place for journalists to share COVID-19 rumors. One respondent, a Catholic, shared a rumor with a priest to seek his opinion on whether it had any religious implications, such as going to hell. The priest responded that the rumor was purely scientific and had nothing to do with religion. This highlights the religious and social dimensions of misinformation in Ghana, as journalists shared information not only with colleagues but also with religious leaders.

Political Entities

In this study, political parties referred to the major political parties in Ghana, namely the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). According to some respondents, these parties were among the top sources of Covid-19-related rumors. These rumors included the belief that the pandemic was being used by the government to enrich individuals associated with the ruling party, that the vaccine could sway voters to support the ruling party (NPP), and that the pandemic was an excuse to close borders ahead of elections.

Mass Media (radio)

Journalists also said they shared Covid-19 rumors on their radio platforms, particularly the rumor that the virus was not a disease

affecting Black people. Some did so to be the first to spread the news, while others shared rumors for political reasons like making the government unpopular. Also, others admitted to sharing rumors for entertainment purposes or to get attention.

5.3 How Rumors are Spread: Sources and Reliability of Information.

Based on the data collected in this study, WhatsApp was rated as the most unreliable source of information. Most participants saw it as a platform for social interaction rather than a source of medical or health information. They also mentioned that they often used it for fun, casual conversations and jokes, without verifying information. However, some participants rated WhatsApp as somewhat reliable,

which is concerning as it can further contaminate the information environment. This means that people may act on false information received from WhatsApp, which can be harmful to their health.

Community sources were also rated as unreliable and very unreliable by journalists. This indicates that journalists were cautious about information coming from the community. In the case of pastors, they were mostly rated as unreliable, but some participants also deemed them as reliable. This suggests that there was no consensus on the reliability of pastors as a source of information. Political parties and politicians were considered somewhat reliable by half the participants, while the other half deemed them unreliable. The table below contains further details.

Source	Very Reliable	Reliable	Somewhat reliable	Unreliable	Very unreliable	Total	Percentage
WhatsApp	1	10	12	16	5	44	34.38
Pastor/Church	0	3	2	5	2	12	9.38
Colleague	0	0	3	0	0	3	2.34
Facebook	0	0	2	5	1	8	6.25
YouTube	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.78
Community	2	1	6	7	7	23	17.79
Internet/Bloggers	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.78
Academic Books	0	1	1	0	0	2	1.56
Friends	0	0	1	2	1	4	3.13
Politicians/Political Party	0	0	3	1	2	6	4.69
Hospital	0	2	2	0	0	4	3.13
Sorcerer	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.78
Africa leaders	0	0	1	0	2	3	2.34
Internet	0	0	1	0	2	3	2.34
Media Analyst	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.78
Pharmaceutical Company	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.78

Regional Health Directorate	1	1	0	0	0	2	1.56
Local Digital Platform	0	0	2	0	0	2	1.56
International Media	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.78
Total	**5**	**19**	**41**	**39**	**24**	**128**	
Percentage (%)	**3.91**	**14.84**	**32.03**	**30.47**	**18.75**		**100**

Figure 4: How rumors are spread: sources and reliability

Source: Authors: from fieldwork, 2022

This study examines how rumors spread among journalists and aims to understand the medium through which misinformation is disseminated. Participants were asked about their views on information sources, how they evaluate such sources, and how they shared information within their domain. The first table provides an overview of sources and their reliability rating for all five regions combined.

The figure above shows that WhatsApp is the primary source of misinformation in all regions. Among the five regions studied, WhatsApp was also deemed the most unreliable source of information during the pandemic. Participants believed that information on WhatsApp was unreliable since it did not come from official sources. However, they considered information from certain educated colleagues to be credible. They also received information from the community, including medical authorities or people with medical experience, which they regarded as relatively trustworthy.

5.4 Reasons for 'Intentionally' Spreading Rumors or Disinformation

This section presents the results of interviews from respondents during Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in the five regions included in this study. The data presented here is organized around the main themes that emerged from the responses of study participants.

5.4.1 Information not forthcoming

The study found that one major reason for journalists to participate in spreading rumors or disinformation is the lack of knowledge about the pandemic due to officials withholding information. One respondent said: "Sometimes, you are trying to get information, but people are not forthcoming. So, you hit the ground with something small hoping to force them to reveal the actual situation. Another respondent pointed out that:

There are times that even your attempts to verify with officials who are supposed to give you information could decline speaking to you. This makes it exceedingly difficult, and you may find yourself in a situation where you do not know what else to do. So, at times, you just let it go.

5.4.2 Confirmation and Verification

Due to a lack of information, participants reported intentionally sharing information in the hope that someone in officialdom or the relevant agencies would respond, either to validate or discredit the information. In some cases, journalists even shared what could be seen as disinformation with their colleagues, hoping that someone would have better facts. One participant noted:

Sometimes, when we chance upon such information, we try to share it with authorities. We share it with the person to confirm whether it is true or not, but the issue is that, as you shared it, you do not know whether they will also share it or not. You cannot guarantee it, but I believe that out of one hundred people, about 20% or 30% may forward that information.

5.4.3 Parochial and Partisan Interests

Participants in this study indicated that some journalists spread disinformation to support their personal, ideological, and partisan interests. Some promote disinformation to increase the number of listeners to their radio stations. Others noted they were self-interested in the subjects or issues, hence, personally felt the need for other people to have such information. Ostensibly out could of 'partisan political or economic interests', as well as for the sake of 'mischief or propaganda'. This is evident in the following statements made by respondents:

"We all have our interest areas, and there are some people, yes, who may be journalists, but what they use the profession for is largely different from what would benefit the public."

Others remarked:

We have some media personalities who are affiliated with political parties, and there are also some radio stations that are affiliated with political parties. Sometimes, those things are done mischievously to either send a bad image to the other side or to score a political point.

Sometimes, we have our political leanings. As such we tend to go the way politicians talk. For instance, my colleague was referring

to people saying if you take the vaccine, you're going to vote for the New Patriotic Party [the ruling party], some of us, because of our political affiliation, we deliberately want to push this kind of (mis)information to achieve whatever you want.

During one of the focus group discussions, it was observed that some health officials were partisan themselves and worked with some parochially minded journalists to spread disinformation. One participant said:
Sometimes, officials do not respond to information. For instance, during the COVID era, there was information about a COVID patient at the Nalerigu Nursing College, and the director was so partisan that he would not give any information unless he discussed it with the Member of Parliament or politicians. Here, I have a report from a source, and I need to confirm it with this public officer, but he is not ready to give me the information. What do I do? Sometimes, you throw it out there, and they will come and give you the right information.

Another participant remarked: "Some journalists are politicians themselves, so when they have the opportunity to spread disinformation, they do it." In the words of another respondent: "Just to cause fear and panic." When it comes to why journalists spread rumors or misinformation, respondents provided the following explanations based on parochial interests. One respondent noted that due to a lack of adequate facts or information available to them, journalists tend to go with what they have. Another respondent commented that sometimes misinformation can help journalists dig deeper when they do not have access to factual information.

5.4.4 When the information comes from a trusted news source.
However, the issue of disinformation spread is also linked to the idea of intermedia agenda setting. Participants acknowledged that in some instances, even if they knew a particular information to be false, they went ahead however to spread as it was considered if it came from a source they trusted. A participant in the focus group discussion in the Volta region commented as follows:
For instance, when the COVID-19 pandemic first emerged, someone wrote that seventy-eight students had died from the virus at the University of Education, Winneba, and attributed this to Joy News. Because Joy News is assumed to be a trusted media house, people quickly shared this information. It was later discovered that the story was not true, but the initial spread was fueled by the belief it has originated from a 'trusted' source. Those who took the time to verify the story could not find it on the Joy News platform (Participant 8 – FGD, Volta region).

5.4.5 Pressure that Comes with the Job.
The responses gathered from this study suggest that journalists were under pressure from their employers to report on COVID-19 and keep their news media relevant. Some journalists felt compelled to share information, even if they knew it was false, to compete with other media houses. One respondent explained this form of pressure in the following statement – "I also think there was pressure from the public on journalists to provide information

related to COVID-19. People know you are a journalist, so they pressure you for information" (Participant 15 – FGD, Greater Accra region). Thus, "some journalists may give whatever information they have" (Participant 11 – FGD, Volta Region) just to assuage the burden of pressure they face without checking its accuracy.

5.4.6 To Test 'The Waters' and Get Feedback to Verify.
Some journalists may publish rumors or misinformation they had out there with the hope of getting feedback from their audience to verify the information. The following quotes summarize this perspective:
The purpose is to get feedback from your audience. You post it and people will write, 'No, this is a hoax. No, this is not true.' Some also tell you 'Okay, it is true. I got it from a friend and explained that this and that happened.' So, you then get that feedback, and it allows you to probe further (Participant 13 – FGD, North East region).

Sometimes, if you don't have the misinformation, you don't have the real information. The misinformation helps you dig deeper into the real information (Participant 5 – FGD, Volta Region).

Sometimes you are trying to get information, but the people are not forthcoming. So you hit the ground with something small, so it will force them to now come up with the actual situation (Participant 2 – FGD, Upper East Region).

6.0 Discussion: Explaining why Rumors Spread Among Ghanaian Journalists.
The coronavirus pandemic caught governments across the globe off guard, and the timely dissemination of information to the public was crucial for effective crisis management. Journalists played a vital role in this regard but were also responsible for spreading misinformation, which poses a serious threat to public health provision, particularly in times of uncertainty. It is therefore imperative for policymakers and journalism practitioners to address the issue of misinformation.

One of the major findings of the study is the pressure to be the first to break news or shore up one's popularity among listeners of the station which significantly contributes to the spread of false information. Some journalists prioritize being the first with news over the accuracy of the information being disseminated, due to the competition among media houses resulting from the commercialization of the news media in Ghana. The speed at which a media entity broadcasts news and information to the public increases its listenership which affects revenues. The work of Journalists or broadcasters is fundamental to the commercial viability of media houses. This is a principal driving force among journalists who confessed to having inadvertently or knowingly contributed to the spread of rumors. Some participants during the focus group discussion in the Central region remarked the following as the reasons for misinforming the public during the pandemic period:
[Sometimes, it is] just to let your friends know that you know, what's up [trending news], you got it first, you know, and then you

are telling them (Participant 4 – FGD, Central Region).

Um…it is to gain popularity, that I am the first to share this information – my information is going around. So, a person becomes famous for breaking news to listeners (Participant 12 – FGD, Central Region).

The coronavirus was a new thing we were yet to unravel, and we are living in [these] communities. So, when those issues come in, you may be tempted to want to put it on air probably by way of also educating others or informing them (Participant 6 – FGD, Central Region).

Secondly, the study found that some journalists decided to assess the validity of the information they held by 'testing the waters' to get feedback and verify the claims in their possession. This approach was driven by their impatience with official channels of communication and the lack of recognition for cautious reporting in crisis situations. This may be attributed to numerous factors, including the excessive liberalization and politicization of the media space and its unhealthy competition, media houses' neglect of crisis communication when the public interest is at stake, and low levels of professional standards in the journalism field. Participants during the focused group discussions asserted these claims. A participant remarked that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some had to "get rid of the fact and use their opinions just to taint" persons considered as opponents of the party in power, with the aim of "making good the public image of the government and its agents" (Participant 7 – FGD, Ashanti region). Particularly, during this period there were several public revelations alleging COVID-19-related fraud activities. Hence, assigns of the government used their time behind the microphone to churn out all kind of (mis/dis) information ostensibly to project a positive image of the government. Participants in this study expressed the following opinion to buttress the incidence of spreading misinformation by known or assigned agents of the government working with some media firms as presenters as follows:

another problem is the proliferation of TV and radio stations. Everybody gets an opportunity to talk on TV and sit and think he is a journalist. That's what my sister [colleague] was referring to them as journalist and I said no they are presenters. There's a clear line between these [the two] (Participant 2 – FGD, Central Region).

[Some] persons who call themselves as journalists [but are not], are setting a certain agenda that they want to spread [are given the platform on radio stations to make false claims to court public affection]. [For] such people, the kind of (mis)information they spread, especially about politicians [public figures] are intentional to cause harm to the person [the unjustified dent to a person's public reputation]. We give our platform, so I won't consider as journalists, but they have the [media] platform and be picking lines [cue] for people to even contribute to on radio discussion. Also, the influx of these media houses and TV stations has contributed to this menace (Participant 1 – FGD, Ashanti Region).

A combination of these factors and others accounts for the spread of rumors among journalists because the speedy circulation of information is essential to them, and any delay in obtaining information is interpreted to mean that officials are withholding it. This claim may hold some merit, given that the bureaucracy of officialdom can sometimes cause delays in releasing information to the public. However, the auto-policy of some journalists to put out whatever rumor or information they had with the hope that officials from relevant government institutions would react to clarify   is unacceptable. This suggests a poor interpretation of the purpose and intent of the Right to Information law in Ghana.

Linked to the lack of professionalism is the issue of bias among journalists and its contribution to the spread of misinformation. Results from this study found personal and political interest and gain as a motivating factor for the spread of rumors. The personal dimension of the spread of misinformation is also something that came up. For instance, some participants admitted to sharing rumors because they believed other people should know about the information. By highlighting this aspect of personal interest, the study emphasizes the need for journalists to be aware of their own biases and motivations when reporting on crisis situations.

Similarly, ignorance among journalists sampled was a salient factor in the spread of rumors. This stems from the fact that they may not always understand what is going on, and this is one reason some gave for putting out information that they found to be a rumor. It is, therefore, important to advocate and educate journalists on how to detect misinformation and fake news in times of crisis. The management of crises is characterized by a lack of adequate information, which may account for the reasons given by journalists for spreading information. However, professionalism and the journalistic code of ethics do not encourage the spread of information due to reasons such as the lack of adequate facts or information. It demands that journalists use all available means to secure and verify information from reliable and trusted official sources before going to press with such information. While journalists who participated in this study also felt they constituted one of the first sources of contact with the citizenry for information whenever there was a crisis in society, they had to find something to tell the people, only to realize later that it must have been just a rumor.

7.0 Conclusion and Suggestions for Reform.

This study examined incidents of rumor spreading among a cross-section of Ghanaian journalists. The aim was to explore the motives and methods behind circulating disinformation or misleading the public during the active period of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana. In a sense, this phenomenon can be attributed the liberalized nature of the media space in Ghana, which has become excessively commercialized, and driven by the need for speed in breaking news. As a result, the competition for news has led many journalists to neglect due diligence and ethical considerations in their reporting.

Despite the Ministry of Health, Ghana Health Service, and the COVID-19 Secretariat at the Presidency instituting guidelines for communication or disseminating information to the public

regarding the evolving situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists still felt the need to use other means to gather and share related news. This could be attributable to Ghanaian journalists' (mis)understanding of state information as lacking the entirety of the relevant information. However, this overlooks the fact that pandemic-related communication, like any other disaster or risk communication, follows protocols and specialized institutions must be strategic in the kind of information they release to the public, considering all factors at play. This situation could be avoided with continuous training programs for journalists with specialization in health and related issues and their respective media houses to understand the importance of relying on accurate information from authorized or specialized institutions. Furthermore, when journalists encounter challenges in accessing necessary information, they should consider utilizing the Right to Information Law to obtain the required data from relevant public institutions for the purpose of public education and information. By doing so, journalists can avoid resorting to unprofessional practices of disseminating misinformation or disinformation, falsely assuming it will pressure public officials to be more forthcoming. This approach would promote transparency, professionalism, and public trust in effectively managing crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic [44].

Effective and responsible media practice is fundamental to the functioning of democracies. In today's globalized digital media age, it is widely recognized in progressive democratic societies that media outlets should prioritize the production of accurate information to inform and educate the public. To counteract the rush to broadcast information without due diligence, media houses must adopt progressive editorial policies that prioritize the public interest over corporate profit. This becomes especially crucial considering the reasons highlighted by participants in this study, where the desire to be first with the news, often driven by the pursuit of higher listenership and increased profits, has been a key factor in the dissemination of misinformation or disinformation during the pandemic. By implementing such measures, effective media engagement can be fostered, serving the management of crisis situations and the greater public good.

Hence, deducing from the findings of this study, we suggest for consideration by actors within the information ecosystem in Ghana the following measures to minimize the incidence of spreading fake news:

a. *Enhance Media Literacy and Professional Training* by implementing targeted media literacy programs for journalists focusing on ethical journalism practices, fact-checking, and the importance of verifying information before dissemination. This should be a collaborative effort between the National Media Commission, and the Ghana Journalist Association.

b. *Strengthen Regulatory Frameworks* through the development, implementation, and enforcement of stricter regulatory frameworks for media houses that ensures accountability and high ethical standards in journalism and broadcasting, including penalties aimed at individuals and media entities for spreading misinformation and rewards for adherence to best practices.

c. *Promote Collaborative Fact-checking Initiatives* among stakeholders by fostering collaborations between media houses, fact-checking organizations, and other relevant authorities or institutions of state to establish a reliable information verification system, that enables quick debunking of rumors.

d. *Improve Access to Reliable Information* by enhancing journalists' access to reliable sources, especially during health emergencies, through partnerships with health authorities and expert organizations to provide timely and accurate information, thus reducing reliance on unofficial and unverified sources.

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