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Covid-19 Compelling Governments to Listen? Evaluating Traces of Listening to Public Opinion in Ghana's Covid- 19 Presidential Lockdown Speeches

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Abstract

In democratic contexts, attention is often given to voice to ensure transparency and accountability, however, there is little evidence for social and political actors having a sense of obligation to listen, let alone incorporating concerns of stakeholders into policy decisions. This study investigated whether the speeches of the Ghanaian president, delivered during the Covid-19 pandemic, when there was a compelling obligation to listen to inform measures to curtail the spread of the virus, exhibited any traces of listening. The study was grounded in the listening theory, which originates from the idea of path building, where stakeholders engage one another's perspectives on an issue to find solutions. Through the directed content analysis, 15 speeches delivered by the president were analysed. The results showed that the president took policy decisions based on engagements with relevant international, state, and private actors. He also listened to public sentiments regarding the socio-economic effects of measures taken and consulted relevant actors to address those concerns. The study recommends that the art of consciously listening be incorporated into all policy decision-making processes and not only be done during health crises. Future research could consider how listening during policy decision-making processes translates into policy acceptance.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Ghana, Listening, Lockdown, Presidential Speeches.*

Introduction

One of the key issues emerging from public policy making discourse and literature is the inclusion of opinions of experts and those who are most affected by policies during decision making processes (Dommett & Temple, 2020; Ojha et al. 2016). Most important is whether those views reflect in final decision-making. In the case of climate change, for example, the expert opinions of environmental scientists in contributing to or critically evaluating climate change policies both at national and international levels has long been regarded as crucial by climate change scientists and activists. This is because being a phenomenon that impacts the sustainable development of humanity, dealing with climate change requires a reorientation of collective understanding and focus on the key intersecting and interacting elements of complex problems (Hass, 2004). Likewise, measures put in place to curtail the effects of a disease outbreak like Covid-19 pandemic require wide consultations with relevant stakeholders and concerted efforts on all fronts.

The Covid-19 pandemic, since its outbreak in China, has devastated even the robust of economies (David, 2020). It has also adversely affected every sphere of life, including education, travel, entertainment, business, religion and health, all of which contribute immensely to the economic and socio-cultural development of various states. As the pandemic continues its sojourn in various countries with no apparent end in sight, public demand for information has become unprecedented. Thus, the pandemic is attracting a huge amount of media attention as the media has become one of the key sources of information. Consequently, government agencies and central governments have devised media briefing strategies to update citizenry on progress made with the fight against the pandemic as well as scientific efforts and preventive measures put in place, among others. One strong feature of these efforts is the presidential updates given by various presidents on a regular basis to announce lockdown measures and to provide other relevant information. In announcing these measures, it is expected that Presidents consult with scientists who have the technical knowhow which then will inform certain actions and decisions taken, such as lockdown measures, social distancing protocols, restrictions in public spaces, reopening of schools, easing of restrictions, isolation and self-quarantine measures.

However, often, even when scientists have scientific evidence and proposals are made based on that evidence to those who wield political

power, it appears that politicians may not be interested, or they simply cherry-pick data and ignore or discount facts to suit their political agenda (Hoffman, 2017). This speaks to the political dimensions of science and science policy (Hass, 2004). In contexts where science is politically tainted and suspect; where power does not care about truth (that is, objective scientific evidence); or when there are doubts about the objectivity of science, this is likely to occur. A case in point is the United States where the Trump administration appointed a known climate change denier as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency of that country, an action which conformed to the personal stance of the President regarding climate change (Davenport & Lipton, 2016).

In another instance, in 2006, a parliamentary committee in the United Kingdom found that the government “twisted” scientific evidence to justify policy decisions which were actually based on ideological or social grounds (Randerson, 2006). Further, in 2014, the government in Sweden distorted scientific evidence on the state of the wolf population to justify hunting them, (Chapron, 2014). This contravened European laws which frown on the hunting of wolves because they are considered endangered species.

The Covid-19 pandemic, like climate change, requires scientific evidence and facts in managing it. Sidestepping scientific evidence in favour of political and ideological stance may not augur well for efforts to deal with it. Curbing the spread of the disease also necessitates consultations with state and private agencies and actors to deliberate on matters which could work to inhibit or advance efforts to deal with it. Besides, measures taken to combat its spread could also adversely affect livelihoods and businesses. It is therefore imperative that political institutions listen to scientists, experts and other stakeholders in order to make policy decisions and take actions that can favour the cause of combating the disease as well as to keep the economy running.

Statement of Research Problem

Most of the research in the field of communication, especially political discourse, focus on how citizenry is given voice and how media empower the ordinary citizen to have voice in democratic politics (Sorensen et al., 2019). In many democratic nations like Ghana, there is a great deal of emphasis on giving voice to the masses to ensure accountability. However, what is not evident is whether social and

political actors, including those in the presidency, listen to what citizenry say or whether the powers that be have a sense of obligation to listen, let alone incorporating what is said into policy decisions. This apparent “shucking off of the responsibility to listen, and the over-prioritisation of voice” (Garman, 2020, p. 251) can lead to actions and decisions which can have dire consequences. It is therefore important that in a time like this, when the outbreak of Covid-19 is affecting every facet of the economy as well as the social and cultural identity dynamics of various countries, politicians, including presidents, listen to relevant experts in the management of the pandemic, while making sure their economies do not crumble. It is also important that citizens are listened to, so their concerns are factored into decisions in order to facilitate compliance to measures. The need to give attention to listening is because listening is as significant as voice, as “a collective right to be heard and understood has a more far-reaching reform” (O'Donnell, 2009, p. 425). Making policy decisions, based on the advice of experts, becomes even more crucial for political actors themselves as Nobel Laureate Paul Nurse asserts that politicians are likely to be unpopular with the public, if they continue to ignore scientific evidence (BBC, 2015).

In early March 2020, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak of Covid-19 a pandemic, many nations had to put in various measures to contain its spread. In Ghana, the president announced the country's lockdown on 28 March 2020, which became Africa's first, and on 19 April 2020, he announced an end to it. At the time Ghana instituted a total lockdown, scientists had raised concerns about how the healthcare system in Africa could not support a surge in Covid-19 cases in that region (Nordling, 2020). The move to lock the country down was hence largely praised as a timely step (Donkor, 2020). However, having ended their lockdown in a relatively shorter time than other countries in the region did, a question that begs to be answered regarding these actions is whether they were informed by input and recommendations of relevant stakeholders. This study, consequently, turns attention to the speeches of the president of Ghana delivered during a time of global and national pandemic to ascertain any indications of listening that occurred.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the indications of listening in the speeches of the Ghanaian president delivered during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. Who did the president listen to?
3. How did the president's speeches suggest that he factored in recommendations of those he listened to into policy decisions and directives during the pandemic?

Theoretical Framework: the Listening Theory

Listening as a Path Building Activity

The listening theory sheds light on an important aspect of communication, especially within the context of citizenship practices, ensuring conflict resolution and equality (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Although value is being placed neither on one nor over the other (listening or speaking) it is expected that there is an appreciation of the "interdependency [and] the dynamic relation between them" (Bickford, 1996, p. 145). Listening (as suggested by the listening theory) draws chiefly from the idea of path building, where citizens speak and listen to engage one another's perspectives on an issue (Bickford, 1996). The theory provides a framework for public engagement in democratic settings in order to reach a mutually agreeable and beneficial consensus. When space is consciously created for listening in public discourse, it can also bring about a sense of civic connectedness (O'Donnell et al., 2009), and more so, when ideas put forth are factored in ultimate decision making. The reverse also likely results in the more powerful groups "silencing others" (Bickford, 1996, p. 156).

Listening is an intentional act in recognition of what others have to say or what others are saying (Couldry, 2009). Listening is very important in political communication and public discourse because it is one of the ways of resisting "the inclination to preconceive the nature, values and opinions of those being listened to" (Sorensen et al., 2019, p. 233) and forging an ongoing negotiation and involvement in the decision-making structure (McAvoy, 1999). Good listening is characterised by apophatic listening (Dobson, 2014), where there is an openness to hear what is said and avoid "pre-existing interpretive

frames, especially those which are the result of the exercise and reproduction of power” (Dobson, 2014, p. 108). This means that those in authority, be it political or corporate, must be open to the views and input of those that they have authority over and not use their authority to silence them, even when they may have something valuable to offer. In the management of Covid-19, through the institution of measures in various sectors, including lockdown measures, it is important for political authority to get the input of technocrats, scientists, agencies, corporate institutions, non-formal businesses, and even the general public, to inform measures taken and subsequent communication of same to citizenry, using community engagement strategies.

As alluded to earlier, good listening is marked by openness to ‘listen out’ for every side of an issue in order to make informed decisions. In the context of Covid-19, it is expected that political actors listen to the experts and make decisions based on what is suggested, no matter how averse they are to them. Listening, therefore, becomes an active process (Dobson, 2014, p. 58) where there is an active response or reaction to what has been listened to, resulting in informed decision making and not just as a public performance. Listening is also “open to contestation” (Dobson, 2014, p. 160), allowing the space for debate, disagreement and engagement in order to arrive at a decisive conclusion or decision.

Besides, listening is not simply vital for the “pleasures of aural attentiveness” (Couldry, 2009, p. 579), but because there is an “obligation to listen” (Couldry, 2009, p. 580). The Covid-19 pandemic is a time when listening must be taken seriously by governments. This is because even though political actors have been given the mandate to govern nations, in a time of unprecedented global pandemic with the challenge to navigate the complexities of an extraordinary health crisis of such magnitude, it is scientific evidence provided by research scientists and healthcare practitioners that must inform actions and policies. Beyond that, listening to the voices of major players of the economy, including those that have critical and significant stake in efforts to combat the virus and to keep the economy running also becomes imperative.

Methodological Procedure

The study adopted the qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Specifically, the qualitative content analysis was used to analyse

data retrieved. Content analysis “entails the systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter, not necessarily from an author's or user's perspective” (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 10). This method of data analysis in social science research does not require the collection of data from people but is similar to documentary research which analyses, or studies information recorded in texts, media or physical items (Iowa State University Library, 2020).

Firstly, all the speeches delivered by the Ghanaian president during the peak period of the pandemic (specifically, March – September 2020) available on the official website of the Ghanaian presidency - www.presidency.gov - were retrieved. There were a total of 15 speeches that had been uploaded onto the website at the time of the study. The decision to analyse all the speeches was to have a complete picture of the extent of listening that occurred during the period.

When it comes to data analysis, there are three approaches to qualitative content analysis- directed, conventional and summative (Assarroudi et al., 2018). The directed approach to content analysis was adopted. This approach “starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes” (Hsieh & Shannon, p. 1277). In the case of this study, the research questions and listening theory guided the analysis of the content of the president's speeches which resulted in the thematic coding.

All the speeches were thoroughly read and guided by the research questions of the study and the listening theory, the indications of listening in the speeches identified and thematically coded. The main thematic areas that were the centre of focus were: indications of “listening” in the speeches of the Ghanaian president; who the President listened to; and indications in the speeches to suggest that the President factored in recommendations of experts and other relevant actors in making decisions.

Ethical Considerations

Because the data was documentary and data publicly available, there was no obligation to seek ethical clearance nor permission or consent before usage.

Results

The analysis looks at who the president listened to, which informed the institution of measures to combat the spread of the virus as well as to keep the economy running during the pandemic. It also considers the exact indications of listening in the president's speeches and how the recommendations of experts, individuals and players in the various sectors that he listened to reflected in measures and policy decisions by the president, the presidency or government during the period.

Indications of Listening in the President's Speeches

The pandemic did not only affect the health of individuals and the healthcare systems of countries. It is no doubt that measures that had to be put in place to halt or, at least, minimise the spread of the disease could potentially adversely affect business entities which would result in poor economic health of businesses (or communities) and the overall national economy. Although the president exercised his executive authority in instituting measures to curb or minimise the spread of Covid-19 in the country, his speeches showed that he took those decisions based on engagements with relevant international, state and private institutions as well as individuals with the relevant expert knowledge, depending on the decision to be made.

The quote below taken from his speech in May demonstrates how extensively he engaged with and listened to multiple stakeholders during the period of the pandemic:

[...] This has informed the stakeholder consultations that have occurred over the last few weeks with entities in the health, labour, religious, chieftaincy, educational, hospitality, transport, sports, tourism and creative arts sectors. These consultations have hinged on an analysis of the data gathered and the adoption of best practices and experiences of other countries that have attempted to move on in the wake of the pandemic. (May 31, 2020, para. 11)

Listening to the Scientific Community

In his first address to the nation regarding the Covid-19 outbreak, the president showed that he paid attention to the expert opinions of scientist and scientific institutions or organisations. When the first

speech was delivered, the country had not recorded any case, yet he referred to the World Health Organisation's declaration of the Coronavirus disease as a pandemic and called on citizenry to increase their preparedness for a possible outbreak in the country. Based on the declaration of the WHO, the president informed the nation that he had directed the Minister for Finance to make \$100 million available to enhance Ghana's Covid-19 readiness and response plan which would include funding the expansion of infrastructure, purchasing of materials and equipment, and public education. Based on the WHO's recommendation, the president also, in that same speech, referred to calls by the WHO and the Ministry of Health of Ghana in urging Ghanaians to reconsider the custom of handshaking, stopping it completely and covering their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing. In most of his speeches, he encouraged the citizenry to heed the calls of experts on how to prevent oneself from contracting the virus. Below is an excerpt from one of his speeches to buttress this point: "*There is every need to observe prescribed [that is, as recommended by experts] social distancing and good personal hygiene to prevent community spread*", (March 15, 2020, para. 7).

He also expressed readiness to listen to the WHO to direct the course of action to take in fighting the disease: "*We shall continue to work with them [WHO] to defeat the spread of the virus. I am confident that, together, with all hands on deck, we will be successful in weathering this storm*", (March 11, 2020).

When the country confirmed six cases that had been imported into the country by travellers, the Ministries of Health and Information were engaged to help manage possible infections or outbreak by way of treatment and public education, an action which recognised the valuable contribution of the collaborative role of health and communication experts in fighting the pandemic through risk or crisis communication.

The president also engaged pharmaceutical organisations and encouraged them to help in the fight against the outbreak. His speech delivered on March 27, 2020, showed that he had had some form of consultations with them, and he was ready to support them to contribute their quota to fighting the outbreak: "*Let me reiterate my appeal to members of the pharmaceutical industry to scale up their domestic production of pharmaceutical products. Government will do its best to support them*", (March 21, 2020, para. 7).

The institution and announcement of lockdown restrictions were also clearly informed by the expert opinion of healthcare professionals.

His speech delivered on March 27, 2020 showed that the decision was informed by data from the Ghana Health Service and the guidelines of the WHO on the effective means of handling the pandemic:

However, prevailing circumstances mean that stricter measures have to be put in place to contain and halt the spread of the virus within our country, especially in Accra, Tema, Kasoa and Kumasi, which have been identified by the Ghana Health Service as the “hotspots” of the infections. In doing this, we cannot afford to copy blindly, and do all the things some other well-developed countries are doing. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this pandemic. We have a unique situation in our country, and we must take it into account in dealing with the disease, whilst meeting all the six (6) key WHO guidelines on the most effective ways of combating the pandemic [...] So, effective 1am on Monday, 30th March, some forty-eight hours from now, I have imposed, pursuant to the powers granted the President of the Republic, under the Imposition of Restrictions Act, 2020 (Act 1012), restrictions on movement of persons in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA, which includes Awutu Senya East), and the Greater Kumasi Metropolitan Area and contiguous districts, for a period of two (2) weeks, subject to review. (March 27, 2020, para. 6, 7)

The review that he mentions in the latter part of the quotation above was also to be based on scientific evidence as he indicated in a subsequent speech delivered on April 5, 2020:

Government’s policy and measures will continue to be driven by the science in this matter. The Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) are now partnering government in the struggle. I met with their representatives on Friday, and arranged with them a mechanism for the realisation of this partnership. The nation and I appreciate their involvement. So, in the course of the coming week, a determination will be made as to whether or not to extend the duration of the two-week restriction on movement, and the implementation or otherwise of any more enhanced measures to deal with the virus. (April 5, 2020, para. 11, 12)

In another speech delivered on April 19, 2020, he reiterated the readiness of the government to pay attention to scientific data to inform policy decisions: “*The decision to impose restrictions on movement was backed by the data at hand, and our next course of action, again, is backed by data and by science*”, (April 19, 2020, para. 6)

Consequently, data and expert opinion informed the mandatory two-week quarantine and contact tracing measures that were instituted.

I said, in my last address, that Government's policy in this entire drama will be largely driven by science. We will, as much as possible, be guided by the data, with our focus on the 3-Ts, i.e. tracing, testing and treatment. (April 9, 2020, para. 3)

Beyond the institution of measures to slow the spread of the disease, the president also confirmed the readiness of his government and state institutions to give attention to best practices in the treatment and management of those infected with the virus as recommended by health experts and the World Health Organisation (WHO):

Our approach to dealing with the virus, as I have always said, will be informed by the evolving science and data. At the outset of the pandemic, the scientific community and the World Health Organisation (WHO), on 12th January, 2020, recommended two main criteria for declaring someone who has tested positive as having recovered from the disease [...]. Hence, the requirement for the two consecutive, negative tests before you are declared as having recovered. This was the science that informed the guidelines that Ghana has, so far, followed. However, there is now new evidence which states that, after ten (10) to fourteen (14) days, a person, with no symptoms, is unlikely to transmit the virus to others, even if the person continues to test positive [...]. According to WHO, asymptomatic patients, i.e. those who have tested positive for the virus, but are not exhibiting any symptoms after fourteen (14) days, "are not likely to be infectious, and, therefore, are unlikely to be able to transmit the virus to another person". After three (3) weeks of analysing and studying this update and recommendation, and situating it in the Ghanaian context, in line with the admonition by WHO to Member States, this new patient discharge/recovery policy has now been adopted by Ghana. (June 21, 2020, para. 14)

Listening to the Inter-ministerial Committee and other Relevant Stakeholders

The institution of an inter-ministerial committee and engaging them shows how the president recognised the multi-faceted nature of the impact of the outbreak and the need to consult with multiple stakeholders. Just when the first six cases were recorded, the president met with an inter-ministerial committee to get their input on how to

curtail the spread of the virus and other associated matters. The decision to institute a lockdown measure was also partly based on discussions with members of the inter-ministerial committee:

Earlier today, Sunday, 15th March, 2020, I chaired a meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Coronavirus response. After deliberations, I have decided, in the interest of public safety and the protection of our population, to review the public gathering advisories earlier announced as follows [...]. (March 15, 2020, para. 4)

To ensure adherence to lockdown directives, the president engaged the relevant state institution (The Attorney General's Department) to put together an emergency regulation to govern the relevant measures that had been put in place. This was one of the outcomes of meetings held with the inter-ministerial committee. There was also evidence that the president regularly sought feedback from the inter-ministerial committee to review work being done to fight the virus and other concomitant issues that had to be dealt with as a result of the pandemic. His speech delivered on March 21, 2020 confirms this:

This morning, I chaired the daily Inter-Ministerial Committee Meeting on our Coronavirus Response to review the current position. I am encouraged by the numbers of Ghanaians that are observing the prescribed social distancing and enhanced hygiene protocols announced earlier. However, it has become necessary to take additional measures to stem the spread of the virus and protect the lives of our people. (March 21, 2020, para. 4)

Listening to Economic Stakeholders

Most people lost their jobs and source of livelihood during the lockdown. In one of his speeches, the president alluded to appreciating the impact of lockdown restrictions on the public and acknowledged learning about the adverse economic impact of the measures he had instituted on the general public:

I am fully aware of the disruptions to your lives occasioned by these measures. Your personal movements, way of life, the education of your children, your livelihoods have all been disturbed by this virus. But, believe me, the measures are necessary if we are to free ourselves permanently of this pestilence. (April 5, 2020, para. 26)

It was in acknowledgement of the adverse effect of the lockdown measures on livelihoods and businesses that the president held discussions with the leadership of small and medium scale businesses to discuss ways to assist them. This move marked another firm indication of the readiness of the president to listen. Coming to terms with the difficulties small-scale businesses were faced with, the government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, such as the National Board for Small Scale Industries (NBSSI), commercial banks and trade associations designed flexible soft loan packages to assist in alleviating the plight propelled by the Covid-19 outbreak on small scale businesses. This was done by creating time and space to listen:

Government, in collaboration with the National Board for Small Scale Industries (NBSSI), Business & Trade Associations and selected Commercial and Rural Banks, will roll out a soft loan scheme up to a total of six hundred million cedis (GH¢600 million), which will have a one-year moratorium and two-year repayment period for micro, small and medium scale businesses. (April 5, 2020, para. 19)

The president also engaged with the Minister of Finance to table a Corona Virus Alleviation Programme (CAP) before parliament for approval:

We are in difficult times, and that is why I directed the Minister for Finance to send to Parliament the Coronavirus Alleviation Programme (CAP), whose objective is to protect households and livelihoods, support micro, small, and medium-sized businesses, minimise job losses, and source additional funding for promotion of industries to shore up and expand industrial output for domestic consumption and exports.

Through engagements with relevant stakeholders and learning about the difficulties the lockdown measures had brought on people, other social relief measures were also put in place, some of which were: provision of food for up to 400,000 individuals and homes in areas affected by the restrictions, embargo on disconnection of electricity and water supply for a period, absorption of water bills for all Ghanaians for three months.

In his August 16, 2020 speech, it was also evident that the president listened to and acted on concerns raised about some secondary school students who were in dire need of food during the period:

As a result of reports I have recently received that some final year JHS students were going hungry, in complying with COVID-19 protocols, I have just instructed the Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection to begin preparations to ensure that, as from 24th August up to 18th September, all five hundred and eighty-four thousand (584,000) final year JHS students, and one hundred and forty-six thousand (146,000) staff, both in public and private schools, be given one hot meal a day. This is to ensure full observance of the COVID-19 safety protocols. (August 16, 2020, para. 13)

In the wake of pressures mounted on the healthcare system which resulted in the gradual shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), the president engaged with local manufacturing companies to discuss ways of filling the gap that had been created by global shortage. In his April 5, 2020 speech, he said:

This, notwithstanding, Government is aware that more needs to be done, especially in the face of the global shortage of PPEs. It is for this reason that Government is actively engaged with local manufacturing companies to assist them in the domestic production of PPEs., and I am encouraged by the response from the Ghanaian private sector. (April 5, 2020, para. 21)

Decisions about lockdown and easing of restrictions were taken in consultation with various economic stakeholders, apart from engagements with healthcare experts. His speeches on May 10, May 31 and other occasions showed that he listened to the main actors of the economy and the expert opinions of scientists to take decisions regarding restrictions or the easing of same. On May 10, 2020, the president said:

All stakeholder bodies I have interacted with over the last three (3) weeks, in the health, labour, religious, chieftaincy, educational, hospitality, tourism and creative arts sectors, share in this opinion, because, collectively, we believe they are essential for our very survival. These groups are also being engaged on the way forward towards the easing of these restrictions, so that our social and economic lives can go back to normal, whilst protecting lives at the same time. Soon, those

engagements will enable us to design a clear roadmap for the easing of restrictions. (May 10, 2020, para. 10)

The aviation sector is one of the strongholds of the economy which suffered a shut-down because of the pandemic. Based on engagements with and the recommendations of players in the immigration and aviation industry as well as the Ministry of Health and the Ghana Health Service, decisions about border closure and reopening were taken. For example, on the reopening of the international airport, the President's speech showed that it was to be based on the expert advice of relevant stakeholders:

The Ministry of Aviation, the Ghana Civil Aviation Authority and the Ghana Airports Co. Ltd., have been working, with the Ministry of Health and its agencies, to ascertain our readiness to reopen our airport [...]. The outcome of that exercise will show us the way and determine when we can reopen our border by air. (August 16, 2020, para. 17)

Listening to Educational Stakeholders

Listening was also evident in the president's presentation on education. The directive given by the president to halt the attendance of school was arrived at in consultation with stakeholders in the educational sector. The president mentioned in his speeches that he had had engagements with educational sector stakeholders, such as heads of Senior High Schools, Vice Chancellors, representatives from the Ghana Education Service and the Ministry of Education. His speeches on May 10, June 21, July 26 and August 16, 2020 reflected this. The decision to halt physical school attendance in order to curb the spread of the pandemic as well as the easing of it were based on engagements with educational stakeholders as depicted in the president's speeches at different times:

On Thursday, I held consultations with members of both the Conference of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools (CHASS), and the Association of Principals of Technical Institutes (APTI), to agree on the modalities for the return of the students", (June 21 2020, para. 4)

Vice Chancellors of both public and private universities were also consulted on the closure and reopening of universities: "*After extensive stakeholder consultations, the decision has been taken for continuing students in these*

tertiary institutions to return to school, on 24th August, to finish their academic year”, (August 16, 2020, para. 14)

Listening to Members of other Political Parties (Opposition Leaders)

Even though not often, there was a seeming effort by the president to get the input of opposition party leaders in the handling of the outbreak. He held a meeting with them and engaged them on how the government can handle the outbreak effectively: *“I was encouraged by the appreciation of Government’s handling of the pandemic, and the offer of support by the leadership of the major political parties in the country, whom I met on Friday”*, (April 5, 2020, para. 13)

Discussion of Results

It was evident that the president of Ghana made significant efforts to consult with multiple stakeholders in the fight against the Covid-19 outbreak and to handle the socio-economic effects of measures that were taken to curb the outbreak. The president’s speech to the nation advising Ghanaians to be on the alert and asking relevant state agencies to prepare for a possible outbreak just after the World Health Organisation declared the Covid-19 disease a pandemic shows the value he placed on science and his readiness to listen to and to take advice from science experts. More so, most of his speeches showed that actions that were taken were partly informed by WHO guidelines, protocol and response plan for Covid-19. This was the opposite for a country like the United States, where their president downplayed initial warnings by the international body for health (Keith, 2020).

The Ghanaian president also handled the COVID-19 crisis in an inclusive manner, consulting regularly with science experts, players in the educational sector, traditional leaders, religious groups, members of the business community, among others, to elicit their concerns, apprise them of his decisions and to seek their views and inputs. These regular engagements with stakeholders to seek their views is a good sign that he was open to the idea of path building, where citizens speak and listen to engage one another’s perspectives on an issue (O’Donnell et al., 2009) as the listening theory advocates. The president making efforts to engage with relevant stakeholders is an indication that he recognises that appropriate decisions are taken when one is ready to listen to all sides of

an issue to know the available options and settle on the most viable ones. This is the essence of listening as proffered by the listening theory. Furthermore, engaging with relevant stakeholders ensures cooperation when it comes to complying with measures and policies. For instance, as a result of consultative meetings held with religious leaders, the government did not face opposition from religious organisations during the ban of religious mass gatherings.

Listening is not averse to views that do not support one's stance but objectively looks out for the most suitable and mutually beneficial solutions. So, in taking certain steps based on an objective opinion, as a result of proper engagements with relevant actors, some of the decisions may have not been in favour of the personal stance of the president. Nevertheless, the listening theory suggests that the listener sets aside personal biases, judgement and passiveness and demands "self-annihilation" and genuine openness to the speaker [or the message] (Fiumara, 2013; Bickford, 1996). Hence, the president's consultations with opposition party leaders were a significant sign of "an effort to make room for a variety of expressions which may surprise and challenge" (Bickford, 1996, p. 154). Making the space to listen to the opposition was likely to be the time to be challenged and critiqued. Some leaders may avoid such 'awkward' situations. However, the president's decision to engage members of the opposition parties to get them to provide feedback on measures his administration had taken and to also get their input on what could be done was a sign that he was keen to listen. But, in his speech, he did not mention what the opposition said that challenged him and the resultant actions he was going to take or had taken. He only mentioned the commendations he received from the opposition regarding his efforts to manage the health crisis and not what they recommended. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether the attention the president gave to the opposition through listening resulted in the incorporation of their views in policies and directives.

Also, it is only once in his speeches did the president indicate that he engage with the members of the opposition, pointing to the fact that he perhaps did not engage them as regularly as he did with the other stakeholders he listened to. It could be assumed that the minimal engagement he had with them stemmed from the fact that the opposition did not have a major role to play in handling the crisis and in putting the economy back on track. Besides, even if the opposition did have any alternative strategies, they may not have generously shared

them with him for the sake of political expediency, which may have accounted for the minimal engagement with them. Notwithstanding, it would have been ideal if the president had engaged the opposition more frequently, as it would have provided the platform for him to be assessed by groups who do not necessarily share in his ideologies and to get their input on handling the crisis.

A key factor in handling any health crisis is effective health communication (Finset et al., 2020). This is because “unlike scientists and experts who recognize risk based on scientific evidence, the general population tends to have more fear and perceive more risk than the actual risk itself, due to uncertainties created by insufficient and inaccurate information” (Paek, 2016, p. 1). This is especially so in a period of a novel disease outbreak like Covid-19. An example is the 2015 South Korean Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) epidemic which revealed the importance of effective communication during a health crisis. Hence, a well-managed health communication programme/campaign becomes vital in a time like this, as it can help manage “uncertainty and fear, promote and accomplish adherence to necessary behaviour change, and meet individuals’ fear and foster hope” (Finset et al., 2020, p. 874).

In the speeches of the president it was realised that, right from the outset, he tasked the Ministry of Information, which is the government agency responsible for public relations and communication of public policies and social interventions by the government of Ghana, to lead communications campaign regarding Covid-19. This was to be done in collaboration with relevant health stakeholders like the Ministry of Health and the Ghana Health service. Typical of any communications campaign run by a professional entity, feedback on information disseminated is sought. The reactions in the form of feedback informs how subsequent campaigns are carried out. The feedback can also be factored into future government policies and actions. This is because while effective risk communication permits those at risk to understand and adopt protective behaviours, it also allows authorities and experts to listen to targets of communication in order to attend to their concerns and find relevant and acceptable solutions to them (World Health Organisation, 2017). Thus, it is expected that by engaging the Ministry of Information to lead campaign efforts, there was listening through feedback which was brought to the attention of Government for quick response to help address concerns and to ameliorate challenges faced by citizenry during the period. This may have reflected in the

policy directions regarding socio-economic interventions that were instituted.

One important principle of health and risk communication, without which the public will not act on information disseminated by public officials, is trust (Paek, 2016). Accordingly, the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines for communication during the pandemic recommend early announcement of outbreak and community involvement as two of the means to boost trust. The speeches of the president reflected this approach which is also a sign of listening. According to Donkor (2020) the approach the president adopted in regularly engaging with relevant stakeholders garnered him a lot of support and trust. This is in line with what the listening theory posits about listening being a requirement for understanding as it is “an act of attention, a willingness to focus on the other, to heed both their presence and their communication” (Husband, 2009, p. 441) which result in mutual consensus.

Conclusion

This study investigated indications of listening in the speeches of the Ghanaian president delivered during the peak period of the Covid-19 pandemic (March – September 2020) when there was a compelling obligation to listen to experts to inform decisions and measures to curtail the spread of the virus and to keep the economy running. The analysis of the president’s speeches showed that many of the directives and actions taken were based on engagements with relevant state agencies and experts to listen to them as well as based on scientific evidence/data. Some of his speeches also showed that he listened to the plight of citizenry and acted to address those concerns through engagements with relevant institutions.

Listening to scientists in a period of a health crisis is important because scientists are the main stakeholders in handling any health crisis, while scientific data also becomes the backbone for actions to take to curb the spread of the disease. Similarly, the inclusion of communication experts, through the Ministry of Information, was also a good sign of the recognition of professional communication during a health crisis. Risk communication experts must work with scientists when it comes to handling public health crisis in order to offer an effective, well-managed and precise communications and educational campaigns about the disease.

The speeches exhibited some form of engagement with opposition political actors, however, the proposals the opposition made regarding how the government should handle the crisis were not reflected in the speeches of the president. Therefore, there cannot be a determination about what the members of opposition political parties suggested and which ones the president paid attention to and whether it showed that the president was a good listener. Some of the president's speeches were later followed by communiqués and media briefings by the Ministry of Information and other government agencies to clarify issues and to provide further details on some of the issues addressed by the president. It may have been vital for respective state agencies responsible for the execution of measures to bring clarity to directives that were given by the president in order to avoid semantic noise (i.e. disruptions that interfere in interpretation of communication or a message, leading to misinterpretation).

Recommendations

The findings of this study point to a recommendation that the art of consciously listening be incorporated into all policy decision-making processes and not only be done during health crises. This will lead to policies and decisions which get the buy-in of all major stakeholders. Accordingly, future research could look at how governments listen during policy decision-making processes and how policies are communicated. Research attention may also be given to how listening during policy decision-making processes translates into the implementation of government policies and directives as well as the acceptance or the disposition to support policies and directives.

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