Enhancing Health Literacy in Ghana: The Role of Media and Information Literacy

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Ghana in recent years has witnessed an increase in digital health solutions such as the provision of telemedicine services, the use of health apps, and the widespread dissemination of health information. The newly developed **National Policy and Strategy on Digital Health** which builds on previous strategies on the deployment of **information and communication technologies** (ICTs) and **e-health** lend credence to efforts at adopting innovative solutions to respond to the health needs of the Ghanaian populace and enhance healthcare service delivery in the country.

Although digital technologies can be leveraged to help people manage illnesses, reduce health risks, and promote wellness, it is worth noting that there still remain some major issues associated with the digital revolution that is fast shaping all aspects of life including health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has taken cognizance of this, and through its **Global Strategy on Digital Health** is spearheading the ethical, safe, secure, reliable, equitable and sustainable use of digital and other cutting-edge technologies in various health contexts. While the people-centered approach espoused by the WHO is anchored on fostering holistic digital health literacy, Ghana's Health Service as can be observed in the policy and strategy on digital health appears to be more interested in building a digitally competent health workforce, with less focus on developing the digital health literacy of the wider population.

Ghana might have done fairly well on the **2023 Global Digital Health Monitor Score**, but the country has a major problem in the realm of health communication and media programming in the areas of health talk shows, commercial promotion of medical services, and advertisement of health products on various media and information outlets. Although the dissemination of health information can help educate people about various health conditions, available treatments, and preventive measures, the extent to which traditional media, social media platforms, and other digital channels have become conduits for spreading false or misleading health information in Ghana is quite alarming as this has the tendency and negative consequence of harming the health and wellbeing of individuals. This disturbing and pervasive phenomenon which inarguably constitutes health misinformation or disinformation has been on the radar of Ghana's Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) which has **resolved to clampdown on the commercial promotion and media advertisement of unapproved drugs** and other health scams. Notwithstanding this regulatory assurance, the need for individuals to develop health literacy is fundamentally crucial in addressing the menace by reducing the extent to which people fall prey and become victims to false and misleading health information. In this regard, media and information literacy (MIL) comes to the fore as critical in empowering individuals with knowledge and skills that can help them discern credible health information from misinformation and disinformation.

Before delving into how MIL can help enhance health literacy in Ghana, it is worth shedding light on some key terms. Digital health simply refers to the development and use of digital technologies to improve health. Media and information literacy generally refers to the set of knowledge and skills that enable people to be able to access, analyse, evaluate, and use information from different media sources critically and responsibly. The last term which combines digital literacy and health literacy encompasses having the knowledge and skills to be able to seek, find, understand, evaluate and apply health information from various media sources including digital platforms to address or solve a health problem or need. These terms have a linkage in that as digital technologies become widespread and contribute to making healthcare more accessible and somewhat affordable, individuals who engage with digital health platforms and consume health information from diverse media sources need to become more adept at critically evaluating the credibility and reliability of such content to inform their health-related decisions and actions.

Data by the National Communications Authority indicates that as of the end of 2023, there were **747 radio stations** and **175 television stations** in Ghana. There are also about **24 million internet users** and **7.4 million social media users** in the country. Although there is no nationally representative data on the number of people who rely on media outlets and digital platforms for information on health-related matters and products in Ghana, **a study published in 2017** gives a snapshot of the country's health information consumption landscape. The study which surveyed 650 people reported the following: 68% used the internet for health information and related purposes; 72% acted on the information to change their health behaviour; and just about 40% consulted health professionals after accessing health information on the internet. Media and information sources monitoring also shows that no single day passes without the advertisement of herbal medicine. It is also common to see celebrities and public figures including pastors using their social media pages to engage in influencer marketing of one medicine or health-related product or another.

Although many people seek, come across or consume health information from these media and information sources, Ghana's health communication and information landscape is not sanitized. It is common to come across television and radio advertisements of a particular herbal medicine being touted as potent in curing all kinds of diseases including HIV/AIDS, cancer, diabetes, and hypertension. A classic instance is The Fourth Estate's investigation dubbed, **Dangerous Endorsement: Expose' on Herbal Medicine Advertising in Ghana** ,which uncovered how eight media houses advertised a fake and unlicensed herbal product, Macofa Herbal Mixture. Today, social media platforms are also flooded with ads and endorsements of fertility and flat tummy teas, sexual organ enlargement and tightening pills, gels and oils as well as other products purported to enhance sexual performance. Many of these ads promote miracle cures with no side effects and instant treatments for various ailments that are not scientifically proven. Some radio and television stations also produce health talk shows that churn out unverified health tips. Although some **media outlets** and **social influencers** have been exposed and arrested in this respect for false advertising, endorsement and sale of dangerous and unregistered drugs as well as other dubious health-related products in the country, the problem is still prevalent. The challenge is that most of the unsuspecting, gullible and desperate members of the Ghanaian populace tend to assume authenticity of these medicine and health-related adverts which pose significant threats to their health and wellbeing.

To help people navigate the complicated health information landscape in Ghana which is muddied with myths, half-truths, falsehoods, exaggerations and conspiracy theories, building and equipping the general population with media and information literacy skills has become of utmost importance. MIL has the potential to make people health literates in order to help them make informed choices or decisions regarding their health as they consume health information from different media sources including digital platforms in Ghana. The following are some MIL skills that people can learn and apply:

- Evaluating the source of health information and other related content: It is critical that while individuals come across and engage with health information on diverse media source including digital platforms, they go further to verify the credibility and authority of such sources. This can help members of the Ghanaian populace to identify and verify authoritative, authentic and trusted media and information sources from fake and unscrupulous ones.

- Critically analysing health information and promotional contents: Individuals should also subject claims made in medicine adverts and other promotional contents on health to question, especially those that seem to be too good to be true. People should enquire about the ingredients of the advertised medicine or herbal products, their scientific backing and side effects, and the FDA approval status of the products as well as the adverts promoting them. This will help people identify health scams, recognize red flags, and determine the authenticity and quality of the medicines or health related products to inform their health decisions and actions.

- Cross-referencing the sources of health information: Instead of relying on a single media and information source, another critical thing people can do is to check multiple reliable sources for every health information they come across, especially advertisement of medicine and other health products that seem suspicious. It would also be prudent for people to go further and consult medical or health professionals for better explanation regarding the health information they consume on both traditional media and digital platforms including social media. This is a kind of fact-checking skill people can employ to identify outright false claims about advertised medicines and misleading health information.

As the media and digital landscape become vast and saturated in Ghana, so will the proliferation of health-related messages and information circulated through traditional media and digital sources including social media platforms increase. To help people mitigate the risks of health misinformation and disinformation which are often driven by commercial interests, MIL is critical in empowering individuals to become health literates. With MIL competencies and health literacy, individuals would be better equipped to discern credible health information sources and content to make informed choices about their health.

While MIL and health literacy can arm people against false and misleading health information, the government and responsible agencies including the Ghana Health Service, Food and Drugs Authority, Ghana Standards Authority, the Media Commission and other relevant stakeholders must also work to sanitize the country's health communication and information landscape to make it safe and secure for everyone.

ABOUT

Penplusbytes is a not-for-profit organization driving change through innovations in the following key areas: using new digital technologies to enable good governance and accountability, new media and innovations, climate and well-being, and enhancing oversight for effective utilisation of mining, oil and gas revenue and resources.

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