

REPORTED INCIDENTS IN THE EBOLA CRISIS IN GUINEA, LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF NEWSPAPERS

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Background: Public health measures to mitigate the recent Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak have been disrupted by unexpected reactions from affected communities such as failure to cooperate or violence targeting members of intervention teams.

Objective: To perform a systematic review of opposing situations occurring in Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone reported in the main newspapers, aiming at assisting all stakeholders in future haemorrhagic fever outbreaks.

Methods: A systematic search using predefined keywords of online available newspaper articles or reports of the 5 highest print runs in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, their neighboring countries (Mali, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and the Ivory Coast) and from France, UK and USA published from 21st of March 2014 to 31st of December 2014 was performed. This search was extended by seeking relevant articles in online accessible Panafrican newspapers. Two independent reviewers selected articles reporting incidents. The content of each article was assessed and data was collated. Each selected article was categorized by events and contexts.

Results: Our research yielded 286 articles, of which 85 relevant articles were finally included in the study. 55 articles (65%) were issued by the Northern countries studied, while 30 (35%) were African publications.

- Twenty-two different opposing events were described with 50% occurring in Guinea, 30% occurring in Liberia and 20% occurring in Sierra Leone.
- Three main types of events were reported: violence, dissimulation or escaping, and blocking.
- Three contexts were identified: funeral practices (causing anger over non respect of rituals), individual or community liberty restrictions (causing fear of contamination, food shortage, or economic consequences), perceptions of EVD origin and transmission (EVD reality denial, beliefs of abuse in treatment centers, beliefs of intentional contamination by intervention teams).

Discussion and conclusion: Our media review reported mainly sensational and emotion-based events, most of them occurring in Guinea. Important intervention aspects such as contact cases lost to follow-up or health care workers' refusal to provide assistance to EVD people were not mentioned. None of the selected articles identifying opposing situations mentioned clear comprehensive, accessible and constructive public health messages. Communication officers with public health expertise from Ministry of Health may usefully accommodate the writing of such articles – without compromising journalistic independence – in order to provide affected communities adequate understanding of EVD. Although newspapers are not necessarily the main medium to convey public health messages, their potential impact on individual opinion and community support needs to be further explored.