Author’s response to reviews

Title: Controversial Ebola Vaccine Trials in Ghana: A thematic analysis of critiques and rebuttals in digital news

Authors:

Per Egil Kummervold (per.egil.kummervold@norut.no)
William Schulz (william.schulz@lshtm.ac.uk)
Elisabeth Smout (elizabeth.smout@lshtm.ac.uk)
Luis Fernandez-Luque (luis.tromso@gmail.com; luis.luque@norut.no)
Heidi Larson (heidi.larson@lshtm.ac.uk)

Version: 2 Date: 24 May 2017

Author’s response to reviews:

Dear editor,

Thank you for your constructive comments concerning our manuscript entitled “Controversial Ebola Vaccine Trials in Ghana: A thematic analysis of Critiques and Rebuttals in Digital News”.

We have studied your comments thoroughly and made corrections accordingly. We appreciate the reviewers’ points, and we are happy to say we feel the paper has become stronger following this revision. We have attached both clean and change-tracked versions of the paper, as well as a list of the changes as requested, and we have detailed our responses to each of the editor and reviewer comments below:

Editor Comments:

(1) Please move the list of abbreviations to before the Declarations section

RESPONSE: This is fixed in the manuscript.
Please correctly format the Acknowledgements section in the Declarations as detailed here: https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/submission-guidelines/preparing-your-manuscript/research-article

RESPONSE: We have changed the text under Declaration - Competing interests on page 23. The new paragraph now reads:

"HL has served on the Merck Vaccine Strategic Advisory Board, and is the director of the Vaccine Confidence Project (VCP), which has received funds from Merck and GSK to convene research symposia and has advised GSK on vaccine hesitancy issues. WS also is a researcher with the VCP."

We have also added a Acknowledgements with the text:

“We wish to thank Prof. Alex Dodoo for his advice and feedback.”

Isaac Chun-Hai Fung, Ph.D. (Reviewer 1): Summary: This paper presents an analysis that is largely qualitative and descriptive. The authors analyzed the narratives of 139 online news articles that carried the keywords "Ebola" and "Vaccination" and were relevant to the specific controversy associated with the proposed Ebola vaccine trials in Ghana.

This paper provided a detailed description and explanation to the background, and the development of the controversy and its implications to future vaccine trials of Ebola or other similar diseases.

I especially appreciate the visualization of the data in the figures. The figures were well designed to present the data well.

Minor comment:

In the flow chart (Figure 1). The "n" in the first box refers to the number of newspapers (n=9), while "n" in the rest of the flow charts refers to the number of news articles. I suggest that you either use a different color for the first box, or remove the arrows from the first box to the second
box. Because for the current version of the figure, it took the reader a second to figure out why n=9 would suddenly become n=27460.

RESPONSE: We agree with the reviewer that this can easily be misunderstood and lead to confusion. In the revised Figure 1 we did change the text “Major online newspapers selected for scanning of articles (n=9)” to:

“Major online newspapers (n=9) selected for scanning of articles (n=27 460)”

Matthias Borchert (Reviewer 2): Thanks for providing me the opportunity to review this original, relevant and very well written paper. There are a few suggestions for revision, most of them minor. My main criticism is that the paper is not particularly rich in making suggestions how future communication strategies could be improved. Which lessons can be learned from the Ghana experience? If the authors could add to the suggestions they are making, this would add further value to the paper.

RESPONSE: We have made additions/changes to the Conclusion on page 21 and 22 with recommendations we think are appropriate.

1. Consider splitting the following sentence into two: "The study analyses the stakeholder concerns and incentives, and the phases and dynamics of the dispute and provides a unique methodological approach… ", as in: "The study analyses the stakeholder concerns and incentives, and the phases and dynamics of the dispute. It provides a unique methodological approach…"

RESPONSE: Agreed. This is corrected on page 5 in the revised version.

2. "a PHP-based system was set up to monitor…” - add to the footnote providing the URL a one-sentence explanation what that a PHP-based system is.
3. "Because the codebook specified more negative themes than positive themes, no conclusions should be drawn about overall ratio of positive versus negative sentiment." The difference in the number of themes could be accounted for in the analysis by weighting the number of codings: if the number of positive themes amounts to x times the number of negative themes (say 0.5), then multiply the number of positive codings with 1/x (here: 2). Consider adding such weighted analysis to the unweighted one, but do not replace the unweighted analysis by the weighted one.

RESPONSE: We are very much in sympathy with the reviewer’s comment here, as we too were interested in exploring this kind of approach. We tried adding a weighted analysis to account for the different number of positive and negative themes defined in the code book, but the themes do not measure discrete units of “positivity” and “negativity” but rather points and counterpoints in a narrative, which don’t combine additively. We agree this is a very interesting idea, and might try something like this in the future, but don’t think it is possible with the approach we have taken here.

Our conclusion is that adding weights here would lead the reader to believe that the themes could be combined additively, and therefore paint over this issue rather than getting to the bottom of it. We ask the reviewer(s) to consider the more precise version in the Results section on page 9, and the new paragraph under Limitations on page 20, which we hope gives a fuller and more satisfactory explanation of this aspect of the paper.

4. Replace "first articles in mid-May_and remained" by "first articles in mid-May and remained"

RESPONSE: Fixed.
5. I am not convinced that all figures 6 to 9 are needed. I think Figure 6 could be rearranged into themes, with critiques and rebuttals next to each other. If an overall timeline like Figure 6 in its current form is thought to be necessary, it could be provided as additional material. In that case I wonder whether the themes in Figure 6 could be ordered more logically - either chronologically or by topic.

RESPONSE: We agree with the reviewer here, and have reordered figure 6. We have also incorporated Figure 7, 8 and 9 into Figure 6, and are now instead referring to Figure 6 a) b) c) in the text.

6. "Incentives - 200GHC and a mobile phone" - add information allowing the reader to judge the value of this incentive. E.g. compare with average or minimum monthly wage; specify the equivalent amount in USD.

RESPONSE: The following text was added as a footnote on page 17: “200GHC is the equivalent of approximately 48USD/44EUR. According to the World Bank, the minimum monthly wage for a 19-year old or apprentice in Ghana was around 28USD (118GHC) in 2013 (http://datatopics.worldbank.org/jobs/country/ghana)”

7. There is some inconsistency in the paper with respect to how to deal with the restrictions the current protocol imposes on researchers and their communication strategy. In section 4.1 the authors suggest that the protocol itself may need revision ("Then again, the trials were forbidden to conduct any public education prior to receiving ethics approval, so this was not so much a mistake on the part of the researchers, but rather a vulnerability inherent in the established protocol for conducting research, which may need to be revised.

), while in the Conclusion section they argue that the protocol does not necessarily preclude researchers from communicating more effectively and more in anticipation of the debates lying ahead if the trial obtains ethics clearance: "Although regulations prohibit trials from conducting public education prior to receiving ethical approval, this doesn't necessarily preclude the possibility of a generalised national discussion on the need for an
Ebola vaccine, the strong value that such a vaccine would have for Ghana's national security, and the long-term economic benefits of taking part in the international effort." Authors are invited to clarify whether they feel that the protocol needs revision, and if so, in which way.

RESPONSE: The original intent was to contrast trial-specific sensitisation (which is prohibited) with generalised national discussion (which is not). We do however agree with the reviewer in that this suggestion of a national discussion might seem to contradict our earlier suggestion to revise the prohibition against trial-specific sensitisation. We have therefore revised the wording in the Conclusion on page 22 to make clear how this “national discussion” would differ from trial-specific sensitisation.

In addition to responding the the reviewers’ comments as described above, we have also taken the opportunity to make a number of minor changes to wording in order to improve clarity, grammar, and proper neutrality towards the persons and institutions referenced in the text. Please know that these revisions do not alter the substance of the paper. They are, of course, subject to the editor’s discretion, however we hope you will agree that they increase the overall quality of the document.