Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 10 Apr 2017

Reviewer: Matthias Borchert

Reviewer's report:

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.

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…"

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.

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

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.

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.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes
Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

1. Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

2. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

3. Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

4. Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organization that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

5. Do you have any other financial competing interests?

6. Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper?

If you can answer no to all of the above, write 'I declare that I have no competing interests' below. If your reply is yes to any, please give details below.

'I declare that I have no competing interests'

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments
which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal