Outbreak or epidemic? How Obama's language choice transformed the Ebola outbreak into an epidemic

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Objectives

Our aim was to examine in what terms central newspapers’ online sites describe the current Ebola crisis.

Methods

We employed a quantitative content analysis of terms attributed to Ebola. We found and analyzed 582 articles published between March 23-September 30, 2014 on the online websites of three newspapers: The New York Times, Daily Mail and Ynet.

Results

"Outbreak" and "epidemic" were mainly used interchangeably in the articles. From September 16, 2014, "epidemic" was used more frequently, corresponding to when Barack Obama explicitly referred to Ebola as an "epidemic". Prior to Obama's speech, 86.8% of the articles (323) used the term "outbreak" and only 8.6% (32) used the term "epidemic".

Following the speech, both terms were used almost equally: 53.8% of the articles (113) used the term "outbreak", and 53.3% (112) used the term "epidemic".

Table 1: Number of articles used the terms "Outbreak", "Epidemic", Disease", "Virus", and "Other", to describe the Ebola in The New York Times, Daily Mail & Ynet, before and after president Obama’s speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Before Obama's Speech</th>
<th>After Obama's Speech</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outbreak</td>
<td>323 (55.0%)</td>
<td>113 (53.8%)</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epidemic</td>
<td>115 (19.8%)</td>
<td>112 (53.3%)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14 (2.4%)</td>
<td>2 (0.9%)</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virus</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>444 (97.90)</td>
<td>36 (5.6%)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Effective communication is crucial during public health emergencies such as Ebola, because language affects the decision-making process of social judgments and actions. The choice of the term ("outbreak") over another ("epidemic") can create different conceptualizations of the disease, thereby influencing the risk signature.

References (selected)


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