



MEDIA AND HEALTH COMMUNICATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:

Disseminating health-related messages to people is very important. Health communication as a field of study ensures that such information get to the target audience. Over time, issues have been raised on who should write health reports and how they should be written. Even though, there are other sources of health information, media have significant role to play in the dissemination of health messages. This is because they have the capacity to reach a scattered, heterogeneous audience at the same time. These media outlets have proven to be dependable, but are however constrained by the following factors: presentation style; the kind of stories they choose to make public; frames and interpretations given to health stories by journalists and finally media ownership and control pattern. One of the suggestions is that researchers should shift from studying contents of the health reports to studying if health reports are given adequate coverage by the media. Media practitioners are also encouraged to concentrate on stories that are people-oriented and not the dramatic ones.

Keywords: media coverage, health communication, health messages

1. Introduction

Health is an important aspect of peoples' life and should be treated as such. This is the reason government of different countries invest in health care because it has a significant impact on economic development. The Canadian Government in an article on "Health and Development" 2017 states that "*good health is essential for the stability of entire regions, as pandemics, which transcend borders can have severe social and economic impacts on families and can put increased pressure on health systems*". In this season of Corona Virus Disease also known as COVID – 19, it is pertinent for members of the public to be informed and

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educated on how to prevent and manage the disease. It is only through health communication that this can be achieved.

The use of various means of communication to disseminate messages that are health-based is defined as health communication. It has to do with finding out and making public issues that affect the healthy practices of citizens. Parvanta (2011) cites the Department of Health and Human Services' definition of health communication "*as the study of the use of communication strategies to influence individual and community decisions that enhance health*" (p.3). All communication focused on health are disseminated with the intention to inform members of the public, as well as influence them to make necessary changes based on factual information. Torkkola (2016) defines health communication from two broad perspectives which are based on social and cultural practices, which means health communication definition can fall into any of the broad classifications.

"Health communication as both a social and cultural practice, I point out that ill healths are constructed in all kinds of communication- from official health policy document, health news, medical literature, and consultation to television dramas, advertisements, web pages, and everyday chat on health and illness. (Ill) healths are produced and reproduced in different levels and types of communication such as mass communication, health journalism, interpersonal communication, and organisational communication" (p.24).

It is clear that there are different sources of information on health issues and various channels through which these messages get to individuals. Ahmed and Bales (2016) are of the opinion that "*media are certainly an integral health information sources, as they define illness and health, feature services, and products that can help consumers manage their health, and provide a representation of others who have specific conditions to a large number of individuals*" (p.20). Mass media have an important role to play when it comes to the dissemination of health information. Parvanta and Harner (2011) assert to this by stating that health communication uses multiple channels and approaches, which, despite what some people may think include, but not limited to the use of the mass media (p.17). Media have capacity to reach an audience that is heterogeneous and scattered. They engaged most often to inform members of the public about inherent health issues that may or may not affect them.

Thomas (2006) opines that health communication encompasses the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individuals and community knowledge, attitudes and practices with regards to health and health care (p.1). According to Payne and Horn (2007) health communication involves trying to persuade a person or people to take a recommended course of action (p.5). Thomas (2006) agrees with their thought when he posits that "*health communication programmes can work to shape the information a group receives and may attempt to change communication patterns*" (p.3). The definitions of these authors show that health communication is centered on influencing and persuading people to engage in activities that foster and promote good health practices. Finnegan and Viswanath (2009) are of the opinion that the field of health communication has been defined with greater emphasis on communication than on

health per se. This is because it was communication scholars who sought to exercise their expertise in health situations rather than health experts. In spite of this, the essence of every health communication message is to change or influence the choice of individuals or group(s) of people. Information on healthy behaviour and practices can be disseminated simultaneously to a large heterogeneous audience scattered all over a geographical area.

Health communication according to Thomas (2006) is seen as a field of study that represents the interaction between communication and health and is increasingly being recognised as a good tool for the improvement and promotion of good health both at the individual and public level. The promotion of good health is crucial at this point in time when the world is faced with different health challenges. Haider, Pal, and Al-Shoura (2005) have the following to say about the promotion of good health. Effective communication is essential for every health promotion and disease prevention project. The promotion of good health often requires changes in perception, attitudes, behaviours, and practices among target populations (p.2).

Considering how important health is to the economic development of a society, it is pertinent for resources to be channeled towards achieving positive results. United Nations (2007) in its publication on development in Asia and the Pacific assert to this, by stating that *“health is a key component of human capital, which in turn is an important determinant of economic growth”* (p.5). It is in lieu of this that Schiavo (2007) states that *“healthy people have a greater opportunity of using their strength to bring about development in the society they reside”*. This is the reason every health-based communication must be painstakingly executed. Health communication is effective, only when it is able to influence and change perception, attitude and practices of a group towards a certain health issue. Kreps, Barnes, Neiger and Thackeray (2009) posit that health communication involves a broad set of communication strategies and activities that health promotion specialists engage in to disseminate relevant persuasive health information to groups of people who need such information to help them lead healthy lives (p.77). Messages that are meant to communicate healthy practices are usually persuasive in nature. They went further to state that these messages are often designed in such a way that they educate specific groups of people (target audiences) about imminent health issues and risky behaviours that are potential hazards that might cause them harm; raise public consciousness about important health issues.

Steinberg (2007) opines that health communication can be understood in different contexts: a conversation between a person and a doctor in a consulting room (interpersonal health communication); the organizational health communication context which refers to an individual’s experience in a hospital, and finally a campaign on television about dental care is an example of health communication from the mass media context. This shows that health communication can be carried out from different perspectives, either through an individual, health organisation or through the mass media. According to Wright, Sparks, and O’Hair (2013) many health communication researches are interested in the role of the mass media in helping to shape our understanding of specific health-related issues and our more general conceptions of

health and illnesses (p.1). This paper is particular about the role media plays in disseminating health-related messages.

2. Mass media and health

Mass media have a lot of contribution to make towards promoting healthy practices among members of the public. Zarcadoolas, Pleasant and Greer (2009) have the following to say about the role of the media in promoting health.

“The mass media present both complex and overtly simplistic health messages. They can improve health literacy or reduce health literacy. The mass media can positively or negatively influence the activity level, world view and dietary habits of their audience. Mass media can educate individuals about health behavior or establish powerful role models for harmful behaviour” (p.93).

The foregoing is an insight on how instrumental media are in influencing members of the public. In the wake of disease outbreaks, we have had media rise to the challenge of keeping people informed. Some of such diseases are Ebola Virus Disease, Lassa fever and now COVID – 19. Members of the public are brought up to date on health innovations and improvements which are of immense benefit to them. In order to meet their target of keeping the masses informed, media practitioners are expected to know how each medium operates. As this is the only means through which they can communicate with their target audience. It is true, media inform, explain, and frame health news, they may guide people in making important life changing health decision. Based on this, the information shared should be *“accurate, balanced and complete”*.

Media have the responsibility of ensuring they disseminate accurate information about health. There must be verification and scrutinisation of information before they are broadcast to ascertain there is no trace of doubt or falsification of facts that can lead people astray. Baggott (2015) asserts to this by stating that media tend to concentrate on dramatic health threats, irrespective of the level of risks involved. This means that media houses often have area of interest when it comes to the coverage of health news stories which may not be in the interest of its mass audience. The way media decide to present health stories has a lot to do with the interpretation the audience will give to such stories. Obregon and Waisbord (2012) opine that *“health news comes to the public through the particular lens in which the journalist frames the story”*. This means that news is a construction that is influenced by what the journalists think, based on what they have been taught or the house style of the media house they work for. Journalists may be limited by these factors when reporting health stories.

Bearing in mind, how important it is for members of the public to be informed and educated about health issues, media practitioners should be cautious in their practices. Arulchelvan (2016) is of the opinion that there should be an increase in media coverage of health stories knowing the kind of influence they are capable of having on individuals.

“The news media tend to increase their coverage of health concerns as they affect the society’s mainstream, and or the greatest number of people in their audience. But the media coverage of health problems is not a reflection of the health issues that are most prominent in society” (p.175).

The mass media through its dedicated coverage and dissemination of health stories can promote the adoption of healthy practices among members of the public. Mass media messages ought to promote healthy behaviour through the information provided and also motivate people to change their behaviour. This can be achieved if media houses do routine coverage of health related stories or topics as often as possible. This coverage should not be linked to personal or political agenda

“Media messages are expected to promote healthy behaviour by providing information and encouragement towards achieving changes in the behaviour of the populace. This can only be achieved if the media does routine coverage of health-related topics as often (though not always) been linked with other moral and political agendas.” (Seale 2012, p.2)

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to note that media coverage of health stories is influenced by a number of factors, out of which politics is a part. Those who wield power and control most often influence media capability to set agenda on health-related issues.

“Health is also about power and control. Those with greater access to power, resources and the media have greater capacity to set the agenda, to identify health ‘problems’ and to influence public discussion and debate appropriate solutions. These politics influence the public agenda around health, that is which issues receive attention and which excluded, whose voices are represented and whose are marginalized.” (Lewis and Lewis 2015, p.10)

Briggs and Hallin (2016) are of the opinion that there is need for researchers to carry out studies in the area of health news coverage. Most researchers according to them only conduct content analysis on the relationship between health and communication. The coverage of health news is very important and relevant in our world, because health news are always trending. According to them news coverage of health constitutes one of the most visible features of the contemporary world (p.1).

3. Media coverage of health issues

Mass media are expected to share important information. Journalism is the profession that handles the gathering, processing and dissemination of information to members of the public. Omega and Ochonogor (2013) refer to journalism as a social activity that engages people who are involved in the business of writing and preparing messages meant for dissemination to the public. Health journalism is an aspect of journalism that deals with writing reports or stories that are health-related for dissemination to the public. Hinnant (2009) perceives it as a means of communicating health to the public

(p.693). According to Araujo and Lopes (2016) health journalism is the gathering, writing and editing of health-related stories by the media for dissemination to the public. Uzuegbunam, Duru, Okafor and Ugbo (2016) define it as (also known as medical journalism) the gathering and reporting of facts about health in the society via the media (p. 29). Health journalism is an aspect of journalism that has its own features and should be guided by the general principles of the journalism practice. They feel that health-related reports should be “*accurate, balanced and complete*” (p. 110). The journalist at every point is expected to make sure the details of every story are not distorted in any way and that there are presentations of all sides/ perspectives of the story. This invariably means that there is opportunity to capture the minds of individuals through the type of report they disseminate. For Hinnant (2009) health journalism is a primary source of information for consumers to know about personal health as well as medical development and new research (p.692). Here, reference is made to media as major sources of information to the public and the information should be novel. Briggs and Hallin (2016) also assert that media can be used as a veritable tool for the creation of awareness and education of individuals about matters arising in the area of health. Health education is one role that health journalism plays, of which health journalists are conscious (p.32).

If journalists are expected to be conscious, they educate the masses through their information, then, they ought to be meticulous in the coverage of stories. According to Tuner and Orange (2013) journalists are expected to be guided by their social responsibilities when they carry out their duties, bearing in mind the impact of their actions on the lives of individuals and society at large. Health-related stories should have the interest of the larger society as its main focus, and not that of a few people. Health journalists bear a responsibility to society at large for ensuring what they write is not only in the wider public interest, but also to the potential interests of individual sufferers (p.8).

These stories should also be presented in a way that will not mislead members of the public, when there is need for them to make decisions regarding their health. Hinnant (2009) mentions that the profession of health journalism is being criticised by physicians and scientists of misdirecting the public with “*incomplete, incorrect, oversimplified or premature medical coverage*” of health stories. Cole and Harcup (2010) agree that the field of health journalism is subject to being criticised by people for the following reasons. The medical profession is deeply suspicious of health journalism, worried about the creation of false hopes for the seriously ill, the raising of expectations for new drugs or treatments and the exaggeration of reported breakthroughs (p.111).

This view is also shared by Obregon and Waisbord (2012). They feel that reporters who cover health-related stories are often faced with challenges. This is as a result of the complexities that are associated with gathering and reporting stories that are related to health. Health journalists may use simple words or terms to describe serious issues in a bid to make their stories easy to understand by the lay man. This can distort the entire information members of the public ought to get from the write-up.

“The characteristics of news related to health or media issues pose certain challenges for news reporters. Due to the complex nature of medical and scientific information, health

news reporting demands technical knowledge that is sometimes owing to newsroom routines or the lack of specialization of a media professional, beyond the reporters who ordinarily cover health news.” (Arroyave 2012, p.203)

Considering how much a healthy populace contributes to the development of society, journalists are expected to be thorough in their coverage of health stories. Hinnant (2009) adds that health journalism, family, friends, physicians are part of the sources of information that can influence the way individuals perceive health stories. Health-related reports are carried out by the different forms of media based on the following criteria - ‘electronic media excel at covering event driven health news, while print may be better for interpretations or more in-depth health information (p.693).

Considering how important it is for journalists to do health reports, it is necessary to look at factors capable of influencing their performance or productivity. Martins, Weaver, Yeshua-Katz, Lewis, Tyree and Jensen (2013) in their study on content analysis of print news coverage of media violence and aggressive research found out that the value of objectivity and balance, news sources and gender affect the way stories are reported by newspapers. Canadian medical association journal published a paper on media coverage of studies needs more independent commentary in 2016. It stated that mass media coverage of health related stories is often affected by comments coming from independent experts who lack expertise in the subject and academic and financial conflict of interests (among those in the business of communicating health).

4. Conclusion

Having said that health communication is about the dissemination of health related messages, it is important to state that media are major sources of such messages. People are more exposed to mass media health messages. Their ability to reach out to so many with accurate, complete and unbiased stories are affected by certain factors. Among which are politics (influences media ownership and control); publication of dramatic stories; publication of stories that are not of interest to the public and health stories presentation using particular frames. Some of the suggestions made towards achieving effective health communication are improved coverage of health stories instead of excessive concentration on the contents of the reports (content analysis) and avoidance of the use of casual language for report writing. It is also important for health reporters to consult medical practitioners when the need arises. Above all, they have the sole responsibility of ensuring they disseminate accurate health information.

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