

Health Coverage in Mass Media: A Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT There is a greater demand and need for accurate, relevant, rapid and impartial public health information by people, and a growing reliance on mass media as the main source of information. It is well known that the mass media are an important social institution in any modern society. The study was conducted on the health related messages that appear in print media (Newspaper and Magazine) and electronic media (Television and Radio). The radio and television channels, newspapers and magazine used for the analysis were randomly chosen. This aspect of the study gave the researchers an insight into involvement of the media within the health communications. Detailed content analysis of various communication media concluded that all types of media provide information regarding health matters but political, social, crime and sports news were primarily covered in both print and electronic media.

INTRODUCTION

Mass media provide information among people at large so that there is acceptance of any idea to create interest. Mass media displays information about health and make people aware so as to prevent the spread of various diseases. There are various types of mass media (magazines, television, internet, newspapers, etc.). The media have the power to direct our attention towards certain issues. This is the agenda setting theory. In the words of Cohen (1963), the media “may not be successful in telling their readers what to think, but are stunningly successful in telling their readers what to think about”. Freimuth et al. (1984) have shown that many people rely on the news media for their health-related information. Policy makers also obtain considerable amount of information from the media. As Bryant and Thompson (2002) have suggested that news coverage of health matters takes on considerable significance, that has the potential to shape the impression of average citizens and powerful policy makers alike. In the words of Brown and Walsh-Childers (1994), news coverage of health “tends to ascribe the power to control individuals’ health to medical experts using high-technology equipment”. Studies have also shown that 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.

The purpose of the content analysis is to study systematically health related messages in different communication media. The communication

media can be divided into electronic and print media. The electronic media such as television and radio, and print media such as newspaper and magazine were used in this study. The communication media are dominant feature of our day to day life and available both in domestic and public environments. They intend to engage people, to convey some kind of information, and to produce reactions in their audiences which justify their continuing production. Sometimes the main message is clear to the audience but it is also likely that some other meaning is produced in audience mind unconsciously. The purpose of these messages is to engage an audience and influence his/her way of thinking about certain subject.

Content analysis method is used for qualitative and quantitative analysis of health related topics covered in several communication media. Stacks and Hocking (1992) defined content analysis as “a research method or a measurement technique that involves the systematic study of the content of communication messages”. Holsti (1969) gave some steps in carrying out content analysis research such as selecting and defining content categories; defining the unit of analysis; deciding on a system of enumeration; and carrying out analysis. Hartmann and Husband (1974) opined “despite its limitations, content analysis enables us to say “something about what is being called ‘event as news’ — that is, the version of the world daily laid before the public as a kind of suggested agenda for their thought, discussion and action”.

A health content analysis is a useful tool to know how media delivers health messages and

the way in which population receives this health information in terms of the amount of space related to health issues and formats of this space as articles, editorials, letters, advertisements, visual references, graphics, etc. (Roberts 2004). Several researchers had used content analysis to study health related research areas. Bonnie and George (1975) discussed the role of radio and television on the announcements for family planning. Dubey and Burdhan (1981) developed a module on content analysis of message and programmes in health and population communication, to orient and develop a greater appreciation and understanding of communication research among middle and lower level field workers. Singh Archana (2007) studied the role of mass communication in prevention and control of AIDS using content analysis of Indian newspapers. Content analysis has been applied to written documents with varied and complex content, including newspaper editorials (Namenwirth 1968), political party platforms (Weber 1990), novels (Griswold 1981) and recorded speeches (Seider 1974).

There is a greater demand and need for accurate, relevant, rapid and impartial public health information by people, and a growing reliance on mass media as the main source of information. The public health community usually looks to the media for support, attention and endorsement and are considered as a primary source of health and science information, even for health professionals. On the other hand, they are also seen as an important tool to disseminate health information to the population. The news media are quite important in furnishing the public with health information. In line with the agenda-setting theory, Bryant and Thompson (2002) are of the view that "news coverage of health matters takes on considerable significance, in that it has the potential to shape the impressions of average citizens and powerful policy makers alike".

METHOD

Content analysis was conducted on the health related messages that appear in the print and electronic media. Taking a sample of 2 newspapers, the messages appearing in them were studied during the year 2008. Similarly, a study of electronic media was conducted through observation method. The health messages broadcast or telecast by the electronic media during the same

time period have been observed. The radio and television channels, newspapers and magazine used for the analysis were randomly chosen. This aspect of the study gave the researchers an insight into involvement of the media within the health communications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Radio

Health messages can be delivered by radio in many different forms. News items about health events can form a part of regular news broadcasts. Special education programmes on health topics can be broadcast, ranging in length from a few minutes to an hour or more. These can be in the form of talks, interviews, or discussion programmes at the radio station.

In Chandigarh, there are three radio stations namely Big FM (92.7 MHz) which is owned by Anil Dhirubhai Ambani, Bhaskar (Hindi) newspaper group owned My FM operating at 94.3 MHz and *Prasar Bharti* owned by the Government (103.1 MHz). Out of these three, the researchers chose Big FM (92.7 MHz) randomly and heard the broadcast for one week continuously. It was found that on an average there were 40-50 health related items being broadcast per day. Out of these, approximately 20-25 advertisements were of some health clinics or hospitals, etc.; 7-10 were related to cosmetic and herbal products; and 9-13 were general medicines advertisements (Vicco-cream, Dettol, Gelusil, etc.). There were approximately 7-9 health related messages related to different issues like hygiene, mother-child health care and immunisation of children. It was also found that one day before the polio-day (Sunday) the message regarding immunisation was played several times. The message was announced normally for 10 to 15 seconds.

The researchers also listened a health related phone-in program for eight months that is, from September, 2007 to April, 2008. The programme named FM Lifeline was aired every Tuesday from 11.00 to 11.30 am on *Prasar Bharti* (103.1 MHz). The programme was hosted by Sarvpriya Nirmohi and it was a phone-in programme in which a doctor was called and he/she gave advice and solved health related queries of people who called for help. The different issues dealt were normally related to AIDS, immunisation of chil-

dren, different types of cancer, oral health, infections (viral, bacterial and fungal), eyes, injuries, respiratory problems, gynecological problems, joint pains, neurological problems, lifestyle diseases (diabetes, hypertension), cardiac problems, different types of allergies, and aches, etc. On an average, 5 to 10 callers from various places called seeking help. The programme was sponsored by Dishu Sarees, Ambala City, *Chann di Hatti*, Ambala City, and Director of Health Services, Punjab. Sometimes there was an advertisement of some clinic or hospital and messages on female foeticide, mother child health, and immunisation of children before and after the programme. While listening to the programme the researchers found that some of the callers used to thank *Prasar-Bharti* for airing such an important and informative health-related programme. Thus, spreading knowledge and creating awareness among people may prove fruitful for the general public and help them in maintaining their health.

The researchers also interviewed two of the sponsors. First was Dishu Sarees, Ambala City. The owner said that they chose this programme for sponsoring because this was very informative and awareness creating programme for the maintenance of health. He also told that some of their customers told them that they have listened to their advertisement before the programme. The other one Sirhind *Bawasir* Hospital, Sirhind was interviewed by phone only. The owner said that he chose this particular programme for sponsoring because he thought that people would like to listen to this programme as it was really a very educating and informative programme which could help people to maintain their health and prevent them from various life threatening diseases.

Television

Television can have a great impact on people. It can extend knowledge, influence public opinion, and introduce new ways of life. In the health field, in urban areas and in rural communities, it has already served as a powerful advocate of healthy behaviour. The researchers chose one entertainment channel, one spiritual and one news channel randomly to watch on TV. The researchers watched these channels for one week each from 8.00 am to 11.00 pm. The entertainment channel chosen was Colors channel. It was found

that on an average there were 7-9 health messages per day which were related to joint replacement, pneumonia vaccination, and mother-child health care. There was preponderance of advertisements as there were approximately 30-35 advertisements of beauty products; 20-22 were related to female utility items; 10-12 were on health or energy drinks (Boost and Horlicks, etc.); 10-12 were general medicines advertisements (Crocina, Moov, Cough-Syrup, etc.); 11-13 were on oral health (tooth brush and tooth paste related); 2-5 were related to various contraceptives; around 5-6 were on cooking oils; approximately 5-7 were related to ayurvedic products like *Chawanprash*, and Dabur products; and 10-12 were related to baby products (nappies, baby food, etc.).

It is generally found that the spiritual channel is mainly listened to by aged people. The channel chosen was *Divya*. It was found that very few advertisements and messages were there on this particular channel. If there was some advertisement, it was mainly related to some herbal or ayurvedic product. Everyday there was a phone-in-programme in which an astrologer was called to answer the health related problems of people. The astrologer correlated the problems with their sunshine and stars and thus told them remedies accordingly. There was a program *Dadi-Maa* in which an old lady gave home remedies. This program was repeated 6 to 8 times in a day.

The news channel that was chosen was IBN7. It is a Hindi news channel. Comparatively, there were more health messages. On an average, there were 9-14 health messages in a day. The messages were mainly on mother-child health, flu, knee replacement, dengue and chickengunia and on oral health. There was a phone-in health programme everyday from 2.00 to 2.30 pm. In this the doctor advised and solved the health related queries of people who called in for help. The health related advertisements numbered 35-40. Out of these, 5-7 were on contraceptives; 4-6 were related to baby products; 14-16 were cosmetic related products and 10-12 were on general medicines (fast relief balm, cough syrup, Crocin, Gelusil, etc.).

Newspaper

The main purpose of newspapers is to spread information. They print 'news', which usually consists of reports of events. They also include

‘features’, which are articles on a particular topic, and ‘editorials’, which express opinions about various subjects. Health topics can fit into any of these categories. Health news might be a report of the launching of an immunisation campaign, or a speech about health made by a well-known official. A health feature might be an article by a doctor about a certain disease or health practice. A health editorial might urge people to take part in a clean water programme. Newspapers reach many people, very quickly. The press can play a very important part in increasing people’s knowledge about health. According to Brown and Walsh-Childers (1994), news coverage “tends to ascribe the power to control individual’s health to medical experts using high-technology”.

The newspaper distributor of the study area (Kuldeep News Agency and Magazine Suppliers, Shop No. 2228, Pipliwala Town, Manimajra, Chandigarh) told the researchers that his family had been distributing the newspaper in the area for the last 60 years. His father started distributing the newspaper in the area and he used to distribute approximately 200 copies a day. In the span of 60 years, the number of newspaper copies to be distributed increased 10 times and thus the number reached up to 2000 copies a day. Further, he told that in Manimajra and nearby areas like Kishangarh, Daria, Mansa Devi Complex, Modern Housing Complex, etc. a total of 18 newspaper distributors were distributing the newspapers and magazines and they all got the newspapers from Ramkishan News Distributor, situated in Panchkula. The number of copies of newspapers distributed in the area in a day is given in Figure 1.

The researchers selected one Hindi and one English language newspaper for content analysis. The newspapers were chosen on the basis of highest readership in the area. Thus, *Dainik Bhaskar* (Hindi) and *The Tribune* (English) were chosen for the whole one year of 2008 for the

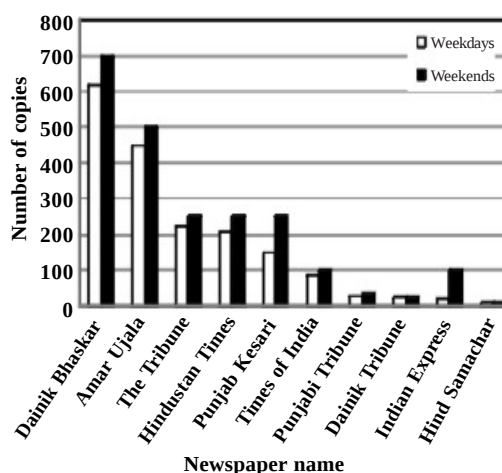


Fig. 1. Number of copies of newspapers distributed
Number of newspapers copies distributed

study. The analysis of different months was done season-wise that is, winter (includes analysis of November, December and January); spring (includes analysis of February, March and April); summer (includes analysis of May, June and July); and rains (includes analysis of August, September and October).

Table 1 gives the season-wise distribution of health content in the English language newspaper, *The Tribune*. From the data presented, it can be seen that health related news ranked first followed by advertisements and health articles. There was not a single advertisement of any health related product in newspaper. It can be clearly seen from the table 1 that various health news lead in all the seasons. There were more messages during the seasons of winter and rains. It can be due to the fact that during these seasons, people are more prone to diseases. The researchers also took into account the feedback which people sent by their letters to the editor and it was found that out of 1,524 letters in the whole year only eighteen were related to some health topic.

Table 1: Health items in *The Tribune* (English)

Season	Health articles	Health news	Health messages	Health related products advertisements	Advertisements of clinics and hospitals	Letters to editor
Winter	31 (26.96)	111 (24.34)	17 (36.96)	0 (0.00)	49 (22.69)	6 (33.34)
Spring	19 (16.52)	108 (23.69)	8 (17.39)	0 (0.00)	42 (19.44)	8 (44.44)
Summer	35 (30.44)	109 (23.90)	3 (6.52)	0 (0.00)	64 (29.63)	0 (0.00)
Rains	30 (26.08)	128 (28.07)	18 (39.13)	0 (0.00)	61 (28.24)	4 (22.22)
Total	115 (100.00)	456 (100.00)	46 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	216 (100.00)	18 (100.00)

Percentage in parenthesis

Table 2: Health items in *Dainik Bhaskar* (Hindi)

Season	Health articles	Health news	Health messages	Health related products advertisements	Advertisements of clinics and hospitals	Letters to editor
Winter	123 (31.62)	56 (19.05)	20 (42.55)	407 (32.25)	176 (27.46)	5 (31.25)
Spring	96 (24.68)	90 (30.61)	17 (36.17)	187 (14.82)	175 (27.30)	3 (18.75)
Summer	82 (21.08)	102 (34.69)	5 (10.64)	297 (23.53)	136 (21.22)	2 (12.50)
Rains	88 (22.62)	46 (15.65)	5 (10.64)	371 (29.40)	154 (24.02)	6 (37.50)
Total	389 (100.00)	294 (100.00)	47 (100.00)	1262 (100.00)	641 (100.00)	16 (100.00)

Percentage in parenthesis

There was a health page every Wednesday. Normally, it was half to three-fourth and dealt with various health related problems, issues and discoveries.

The data on the distribution of health content in the Hindi newspaper *Dainik Bhaskar* is presented in table 2. From the data analysis, it can be seen that advertisements of health related products ranked first followed by advertisements of health care providers. Health articles and news ranked third and fourth respectively and health messages ranked last in the order. The researchers also took into account the feedback which people sent by their letters to editor and it was found that out of 1,164 letters in the whole year only 16 were related to some health topic. There was a health page every Tuesday entitled "Health and Fitness". Normally, it was half to three-fourth and dealt with various health related problems, issues and advertisements of different health products and advertisements of various health clinics and hospitals.

The maximum amount of coverage had been given to political news reports. This category leads others by a wide margin both in terms of numbers as well as the space covered by it. However, advertisements do cover a lot of space as they were either full page or half page advertisements on some health related issues. Advertisements did form the largest single category in the whole year. This shows that although public or the press was not paying enough attention to the epidemic. The government on appropriated days continued to give full page messages. Messages by the President, Prime Minister, Health Minister and other dignitaries filled the pages. The space given to the letter column was found to be very small in the newspaper. It was only one column. The contents of maximum letters were related to the current social, political, religious issues. There were several complaints about the local problems - like water, electricity, road and

likewise. However, Indian public seems to show no interest as very few letters related to health were published in the newspapers. This lack of participation could be a result of low awareness levels or perhaps the seriousness of the issue has not sunk in the public psyche. It is possible that the general public is still under the 'denial stage' as they believe that problem cannot happen to them.

Magazine

Magazines are another branch of the mass media with some uses in health education. They are generally intended for audiences in a very wide geographical area and are, therefore, less likely to be interested in local stories. Many magazines do, however, carry useful information about health. Magazines written for women often have very important articles on child care, problems of pregnancy and maternal health, food and nutrition, etc. Even magazines intended principally for the entertainment of the general public sometimes carry health information.

Regarding magazines, the newspaper and magazine distributor told that magazines were distributed on demand. He distributed 3 to 5 copies of *Femina*, 2 to 5 copies of *Health*, 10 to 20 copies of *Grihshobha*, *Vanita*, etc., and few copies of competition success, *India Today*, etc. Further, he said that every newspaper is giving an extra supplement on career, jobs, education, women issues, etc., atleast once a week. Thus, people did not like to spend on buying magazines much as they got everything in that supplement.

The researchers chose a women magazine named *Vanita* (in Hindi Language) randomly for the study. Twelve issues of the magazine of 2008 were taken and for analysis the months were divided according to season. The analysis is given in table 3.

From the data it can be clearly seen that

Table 3: Health items in Magazine

Season	Health articles	Health messages	Advertisements of Health related products	Advertisements of clinics and hospitals	Letters to editor
Winter	4 (19.05)	1 (20.00)	34 (26.77)	15 (17.24)	3 (27.27)
Spring	4 (19.05)	3 (60.00)	25 (19.69)	27 (31.03)	2 (18.19)
Summer	3 (14.28)	0 (0.00)	37 (29.13)	23 (26.44)	3 (27.27)
Rains	10 (47.62)	1 (20.00)	31 (24.43)	22 (25.29)	3 (27.27)
Total	21 (100.00)	5 (100.00)	127 (100.00)	87 (100.00)	11 (100.00)

Percentage in parenthesis

advertisements of health related products were given the priority than health articles and messages in all the seasons. It was also noted that number of health articles in the rainy season was the highest as compared to other seasons.

CONCLUSIONS

A study was conducted on the health related messages that appear in print media (Newspaper and Magazine) and electronic media (Television and Radio). The radio and television channels, newspapers and magazine used for the analysis were randomly chosen.

From the detailed content analysis of various communication media, it can be concluded that all the different types of media provide information regarding health matters but the political subject is the most preferred area of news in all types of media. Similar opinion has been stated by Weber (1990) and Oso and Odunlami (2008), "The health beat is not particularly high news yielding beat like politics or the economy". The news related to crime and accident is at second place. The news related to social life and culture is at third place. It included various kinds of social activities in the area of Art and Culture, Education, Science, Health, Municipal Corporation, Banking, Economy and Local Administration. However, advertisements did cover a lot of space and time and they formed the largest single category in the whole year.

News related to health in our life is being widely covered. Very important and useful information regarding health had been given in them. There were special programme on radio and television and additional sections in the newspapers on health. It has also been found that various issues related with some subjects were given more space and they were frequently discussed while others were totally absent. The advertisements related to beauty and health products were telecasted more on television especially at the

prime time when the viewership is high. The health messages were telecasted more on radio and in newspapers than broadcasted on television. This may be because of the financial investment which is more in the case of television than radio and newspaper. It is clear that health news rely heavily on health experts. Sometimes, the search or discovery of drugs for curing diseases and the consequences of diseases are also mentioned in newspapers and magazines. The orthodox and western biomedicine is given more coverage in comparison to alternative systems of medicine like ayurveda and homeopathy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following are some suggestions in reference to the study:

- There should be a special reporter for the coverage of different areas of development. Such reporters should be specialists in their subject.
- Due to preference of majority of readers, the health messages should be given either on first page which covers mainly political news or on sports page of the newspaper.
- Due to large viewership, the health related information or messages should be telecasted more during the prime time on television.

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