

Assessing the Quality of Health Reporting in Pakistan: A Content Analysis of Daily the Nation Newspaper

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ABSTRACT

Newspapers are the most important sources of information about health. They are the most influential tools to educate the masses about health. Therefore, it was of a profound significance to understand how they work on health sector of Pakistan. The content analysis of health news was carried out throughout the whole year of 2020. For this, an English newspaper of Pakistan "Daily the Nation" was selected to carry out the research because the English newspapers are believed to have the responsible reporting style as they have the well-educated-cum-trained reporters who work on their assignments responsibly. To collect the data, the archive service for newspaper was used, and 101 health news were identified. The news was further split into two portions, 1) those having optimistic claims, and 2) those having pessimistic claims.

However, the news which carried positive connotations within their contents were named as the news of optimistic claims, whereas the news which brought negative connotations inside their contents were named as the news of pessimistic claims. To this end, health reporting was found of a poor quality as the newspaper, on the first hand, covered the news of pessimistic claims more than those of optimistic claims. On the other hand, newspaper has given insufficient coverage to the health topics with average 8.5 health news in each month throughout the whole year. This problem can be countered only, when the reporters are well-trained and well-educated with special health background knowledge. Further study should be executed to make editors and reporters aware of how important the health reporting in the country is-Pakistan.

Key words: Health reporting, Newspaper, Pakistan, Nation

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INTRODUCTION

Health reporting has become one of the most profound sources of health information. It has the potential to educate the masses about public health. Additionally, public health is of great significance to have the public health implications. It has the power to elevate the collective awareness of society's public's

collective awareness of society's irresistible health issues of public and can possibly wield the influence over public health policies [1]. However, newspapers are the vital source of health-related information across the world. In the United States, adults contributing to 75% of newspaper readership label newspapers to be best sources of information related to health [2].

Also in China, newspapers were meet as the second most used channel of information regarding health against urban people [3]. Even though, internet has made an easy access for masses to the information of different sorts

[4], newspapers still stay to be the truest of the sources of information related to health in the special manner [5]. Besides, they (newspapers) are commonly labelled as more credible sources of health information than other mediums such as television and Internet [6]. This could be the great triumph of newspapers in this age of internet.

For people, generally the media could be the enough praiseworthy means of health information but health information in the media is unable to supplant a personal medical opinion. It is thus indispensable for people to know [7]. Health-related topics that are getting covered in newspaper contained inside their contents the news that affect the public viewpoints for many health issues not only on individual level but also on collective level and eventually they develop their knowledge, beliefs, and health behaviors in an according manner.

Health being the most important aspect of human life invariably remains as a common concern for public. Nowadays, people are largely interested in information regarding diseases, medications, preventative measures, and health-promoting elements. It is therefore important to understand how newspapers report health topics. The way they report the health issues was therefore needed to measure their quality when it comes the matter of public health. Given the significant potential of news coverage in the creation of illness representations, it is thus necessary for the health communication researchers to completely map health news coverage styles. For them to make efforts to achieve their targets, it is also necessary to understand how the news media works.

Health reporting in Pakistan

As far as our knowledge is concerned, no study on the quality of health reporting in health journalism in Pakistan has so far been executed. Because Pakistan consumes too less on the research projects as it is a low-income country in the EMR (Eastern Mediterranean Region). WHO (World Health Organization) has placed the country – Pakistan – in the D category of EMR? In this regard, newspaper coverage of health topics is in the limited in Pakistani region. Besides, Pakistan still lacks in strong capacities of health and public institutions, and it suffers from

deficiencies in its social insurance that gives the health coverage for workers. To this end, this would be the first ever study to explore the quality of health reporting in Pakistani English Press.

Media watch

Newspaper coverage of health-related news was analyzed to look into the role of newspapers in the area of health journalism. Even in the age of internet, traditional media (such as newspapers, television, and radio) across the entire globe is on the rise. In Pakistan, newspapers are being released, circulated, and read in different languages, therefore they could easily cover all the issues. They can perform the watchdog role by countering the problems which the country is facing. However, for the current study, one of the oldest English newspapers of Pakistan namely “Daily the Nation” was selected to do research on the way newspaper is reporting the health topics of country. It has been getting released for the last three and a half decades since it was established in Karachi in 1986. Afterwards, it is being released from three major cities of Pakistan i.e. Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore. To meet the set-objectives, the required information was gathered through archive databases for the said newspaper.

Research questions

What is the extent of information regarding health topics in the newspaper?

What is the claim most frequently mentioned inside the health-related news?

Objectives

In the field of health journalism, newspapers are the most important sources of health information. But the way newspapers are reporting health issues or even developments is really questionable. In order to investigate the way the newspaper works on health reporting, the current study has structured three objectives to meet such as; to understand the quality of health reporting in the newspaper, to determine the extent of health information which the newspaper disseminates among the masses, and to observe the connotations of content of the news.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the research studies on the current phenomenon have been scarce, studies or found

in some parts of the world. Studies carried out on the role of news media in fighting tobacco. They found that newspaper were the effective media in wielding power on readers as well as opinion leaders on the topics of public health.

Previous research studies such as of Wakefield have informed that the media could undoubtedly play a significant role in the process of policy making just through the information of relevant issues they conveyed to the public and physicalizing the public views contiguous to those issues. This is why because [8] acknowledged that masses do heavily rely on media, and they further said that the psychologists also believed that media had heavily implicated in the shaping of shared-understanding of health.

However, Hofstede conducted one of the first comparative content analysis study comparing health reporting in China and the United States. They found some significant discrepancies in health reporting in terms of temporal orientation, controllability attribution, use of statistics, and citation of authority sources. In Pakistan, no such study on health reporting has been worked on, even in China, only two studies have been identified these are Sun, et al. [9] and Zhao, et al. [10]. These studies assessed the health-related reporting. The former study assessed three Chinese newspapers in 2002 and the later one examined only one newspaper from 2003 to 2005. These two studies though went through only the occurrences with which variety of health topics were covered and the means of the health information, neither study secured any answer to vital contextual questions like how risk factors and diseases are embodied and whether there are any dissimilarities in the representation of different sorts of diseases as well as risk factors.

METHOD

The quantitative content analysis method was employed in the present study to assess the quality of health reporting in Pakistan. The content analysis of news related to health was conducted using daily The Nation newspaper. For this, the sample entailed all the news published throughout the whole year from January to December 2020 in the newspapers. To obtain the required data, archive service for the newspaper

was used. To this end, the current study is limited to the news coverage only excluding the articles, opinions, letters, editorials, and so on. In total, 101 news as a result were identified from the whole year coverage.

Units of analysis

To understand the quality of the health reporting, news was examined with what they claim inside them. However, the claims were categorized into two types, i.e., Optimistic claims and Pessimistic Claims. Thus, news showing the positive connotation such as announcements regarding opening of the health-related centers/units, free-of-cost medical camps, job announcements in the health sector, and other announcements made by the health officials/practitioners or even politicians about the improvements to be made in the health departments of the country were put in the category of the optimistic claims. On the flip side, the news showing negative connotation such as death, disease diagnosis, and strikes against health issues (dearth of basic facilities, expensive medicine, and absence of doctors from their duties) were put in the category of pessimistic claims.

Data analysis

The Table 1 discusses the distribution of the total 37 optimistic news according to their optimistic claims inside their contents. Though the majority (24) of the news of optimistic claims were about the announcements of the free-of-cost medical camps. In the same way, 5 news announced the opening of the health centers/units, and 5 news announced the jobs in the health sector of the country. In the end, only 3 news were about the announcements made by the medical practitioners, politicians, and other officials for the improvement in the health departments.

The Table 2 shows the distribution of the news according to their pessimistic claims inside their contents. However, 33 out of the total 64 news of pessimistic claims were about the deaths from the diseases. In the same vein, 19 news mentioned the diagnosis of certain diseases and 12 news mentioned the peoples' anger in the form of strikes against the health deficiencies such as dearth of basic facilities, expensive medicine, and absence of doctors.

Table 1: Distribution of news according to their optimistic claims.

Variables	Frequency
Opening of health centers/units	5
Free-of-cost medical camps	24
Job announcements	5
Announcements made by the medical practitioners, politicians, and other officials for the improvement in the health departments	3
Total	37

Table 2: Distribution of news according to their pessimistic claims.

Variables	Frequency
Death	33
Diagnosis	19
Strikes against dearth of basic facilities, expensive medicine, and absence of doctors	12
Total	64

RESULTS

The present study analyzed and examined the newspaper coverage of health news. The previous year from January 1 to December 31, 2020 was chosen as the coverage period for the study. In total, 101 news related to health were identified and then they were categorized into two parts such as those having optimistic claims and those having pessimistic claims inside their material. However, optimistic claims included the news which carried positive meaning, and pessimistic claims comprised the negative meaning. Although 37 news were of optimistic claims were found, 64 news were of pessimistic claims. In the section of news having optimistic claims, the majority (24) of the news were about the free-of-cost camps. Whereas in the section of news having pessimistic claims, the majority (33) of the news were about deaths caused by diseases.

DISCUSSION

The mass media these days play an incredibly significant role in providing public with health and medical issues [11]. They are also the truest sources of information regarding public health for both the public and health professionals [12]. With this reference, health reporting has the potential to implement a long-term tactic, conferring about the long-term prevention techniques and the effects of treatments as well. Thus, this study was aimed at investigating the newspaper coverage of health news in Pakistan to assess the quality of health reporting in newspapers. To meet this goal, content analysis of health-related news in daily The Nation newspaper was conducted throughout the whole year – 2020. The required

data was obtained through the archive service for the selected newspaper, and 101 news discussing health topics were identified. It was found that the frequency of health news though was too insufficient, coverage stood nearly 8.5 news about health topics were reported in each month. This low proportion of the health news identifies three reasons, 1) The reporters are not interested in covering health phenomenon, 2) The newspaper editors do not usually assign health topics to their reporters, and 3) There is the shortage of specialized health reporters in the country – this could be worked on sooner than later by the health communication scholars in the upcoming times. Although the low frequency also shows that the newspapers are less interested in reporting the health topics, they do not seem promoting health system of the country.

The quality of health reporting was examined by determining the claims which the news carried inside their material. The claims, however, were branched into two parts: optimistic and pessimistic. For example.

Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) cardiac centre will soon establish heart failure clinic and paed's ward for patients, statement said on Friday.

November 14, 2020.

This piece of news mentions the establishment of a ward for patients that imparts a positive connotation for the sake of public information.

However, the news which brought positive connotations were put in the optimistic claim, and the news which fetched inside them the negative connotations were put in the category of pessimistic claim. For example.

Karachi: The coronavirus on Tuesday claimed 34 more lives in Sindh and infected another 2655 persons, lifting the death toll to 1377 and tally of cases to 84656 in the province.

July 1, 2020.

This piece of news mentions the massive crisis of lives stating the death and new cases caused by coronavirus that imparts a negative connotation for the sake of public information. To this end, newspaper has covered more news of pessimistic claims as compared to the news of optimistic claims, and this impart negative impact on the public. On the first hand, it was found that the newspaper has imparted the less information in terms of health topic. On the other hand, it has reported more to the negative aspects of health topics which leave the impact on public. However, this study has found that health reporting in the country is of exceptionally low quality. There are the major stumbling blocks to increasing quality of medical and health reporting in the country. These comprise lack of technical training for journalists [13], the time constraints of news production [14], and the commercial imperatives that drive story selection and headlines [7].

Suggestions about the study

There should be the well-trained special reporter for the coverage of health incidents. They ought to be specialists in their beats. Owing to the choice of majority of the readers, the health information should be offered either on the first page which covers greatly political news or on sports page of the newspaper.

Limitation of the study

This research piece has its limitations. In comparing health reporting in Pakistan, the present study only investigates one newspaper–Daily the Nation. It is, however, believable that other mediums such as television, internet, magazines etc. may produce diverse consequences. Also, the current results may be perceived to be limited to the previous year 2020 only.

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