

JD100

Areas of Journalism



Journalism

Medical and Health Journalism

Rukhsana Ahmed



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Introduction

The mass media extensively cover medical and health related information. These media coverages ranging from print, broadcast, and digital, are considered one of the principal sources of medical and health information (Ahmed & Bates, 2013). As such, the reporting of medical and health related information can influence the general public, health care professionals, and policy makers (Dentzer, 2009; Finnegan & Viswanath, 2002; Larsson, et al., 2003). Notwithstanding the barrage of medical and health related information available through the mass media, the reporting of such information is often criticized as inadequate and incomplete (Friedman & Hoffman-Goetz, 2005), speculative (Larsson, et al., 2003), inaccurate (Gerlach, Marino, & Hoffman-Goetz, 1997), deceptive, misleading and contradictory (Hoffman-Goetz & MacDonald, 1999), and outdated (Coe & Turow, 1985). However, communicating medical and health related information can be difficult and complex. It is not like a medical and health journalist can decide to report on specific medical and health related information, produce a report, and submit it to the editor for production. In reality, dissemination of medical and health related news and information through different mass media outlets such as newspaper, magazine, television, radio, and the Internet, is subject to influence by various factors that are institutional, political, economic, social, cultural, and ideological in nature. For example, in a study of obstacles and solutions to improving medical reports in the mass media, medical journalists identified different organizational and social factors that were attributed to lack of time, knowledge, and space; competition and commercialism; problem with terminology and jargon; difficulty locating and using sources; conflicts of interest and problem with editors (Larsson, et al., 2003). No doubt, medical and health reporting in today's information society can be daunting, and medical and health journalists should not be expected to be experts in all topics related to medicine and health such as disease and treatment, health care spending, public health policy, and so on. However, when communicating medical and health related news and information to the public, medical and health journalists should be knowledgeable and focus on disseminating credible, complete, and balanced reporting (Dentzer, 2009).

Against such a backdrop, this study material is designed to introduce participants to important aspects of communicating medical and health news and information; theories that inform news reporting; mass media's role in shaping medical and health news and information; and ethical concerns in and practices of communicating medical and health news and information.

The variety of topics covered in the study material is hoped to help guide participants to relay medical and health news and information in clear, meaningful, and understandable ways to readers, viewers, and listeners across various media platforms. Each chapter is divided into specific topics and for all topics considered, an attempt is made to integrate concepts, theory, and research with recommendations for practice. For each topic there are reflective questions, self-exercises, and some additional information to ponder.

General learning outcomes

After you have worked through this study material, you will be able to: **■**

Understand and describe the important aspects of communicating medical

and health news and information .

- Understand and discuss theories that inform news reporting .
Understand and critically evaluate ethical concerns in and practices of communicating medical and health news and information .
- Convey medical and health news and information in clear, meaningful, and understandable ways to readers, viewers, and listeners across various media platforms .
- Reflect on the role of medical and health journalists to deliver to the public medical and health related news and information that is understandable, accurate, complete, balanced, and actionable .



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Chapter 1:

Key issues in communicating medical and health news and information

Learning outcomes

After you have worked through this chapter, you will be able to:

Understand the importance of health literacy in medical and health reporting . Use

plain language in reporting medical and health related information and news .

Understand the importance of media literacy in medical and health reporting .

Exercise media literacy instructions in reporting medical and health related information and news .

Understand the importance of reporting on social determinants of health . Apply considerations of the various social determinants of health in your reporting .

1.1 Health literacy

Unlike general literacy, health literacy involves multifaceted skills; it is more than just being able to read, write, and compute. A health-literate person should be able to do more than just read nutrition booklets and brochures: she/he should have the ability to make decisions about eating healthily. As the European Health Literacy Consortium in 2012 defined (as cited in WHO, 2013) health literacy is the “knowledge, motivation and competences to access, understand, appraise and apply health information in order to make judgments and take decisions in everyday life concerning health care, disease prevention and health promotion to maintain or improve quality of life during the life course” (p. 4).

Many people turn to media to gather a variety of health care related information. However, did you know nearly 60% of adults in Canada and 50% of adults in the United States have low health literacy skills? This means that these adults have difficulty finding and understanding medication,

Exercise 1
X Table 1 lists tips for using plain language in written communication. Based on your experience and observation, can you identify other tips for using plain language when reporting on medical and health related news and information?

Exercise 2
X In this chapter, the concept of media literacy was discussed, and table 2 presented the basic principles and key questions to help deconstruct mediated health messages. On a daily basis, news, advertisements, and radio and television shows promote different products, ideas, and services with implications for health. Think about the health related media campaigns such as Special K advertisements by Kellogg: “If you can pinch more than an inch, you may need to watch your weight,” or “What will you gain when you lose?” Look up some of these advertisements and, using the underlying principles and the corresponding questions presented in table 2, deconstruct the health messages.

Exercise 3
X This chapter discussed the importance of health literacy and media literacy considerations and the importance of using plain language when reporting on medical and health related news and information. Reflecting on this information, identify an occasion when you found health information as confusing or overwhelming and explain why. Then identify an occasion when you found such information useful and explain why.

Chapter 2:

Theoretical and practical considerations in communicating medical and health news and information

Learning outcomes

After you have worked through this chapter, you will be able to:

Grasp the agenda setting functions of the mass media at both theoretical and practical levels .

Engage in a self-reflective process regarding what is relevant to you when you produce medical and health related news and information .

Grasp the frame-building functions of the mass media at both theoretical and practical levels .
Engage in a self-reflective process regarding news values that are important to you when you produce medical and health related news and information .

2.1 Agenda setting

Developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda setting, an important media effects theory, implies that mass media have a powerful ability to influence public opinion (McCombs, 2004). In reference to the agenda setting function of the mass media, Hiebert and Gibbons (2000) argued, “mass media decision makers decide what is newsworthy, what is entertaining, what is to be advertised and promoted. By doing so, they establish the topics that people think about” (p. 132). In other words, if an issue like H1N1 flu virus (*Swine Flu*) is covered frequently and dominantly in the news media, audiences will probably regard the issue as more important. Such is the agenda setting power of the mass media; they set the public agenda for discussion of certain health topics over others (Arroyave, 2012), especially considering people view news media as a major source of medical and



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Chapter 3:

Ethical concerns in communicating medical and health news and information

Learning outcomes

After you have worked through this chapter you can:

- Understand how ICTs are shaping medical and health reporting .
- Evaluate online sources for reporting on medical and health issues .
- Understand the importance of producing evidence-based medical and health coverage .
- Apply the Toulmin model of argumentation in producing health coverage .
- Understand the importance of developing cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and being culturally sensitive when reporting on medical and health related news .
- Evaluate the cultural sensitivity of health coverage . Understand the intricacies of using credible sources when producing medical and health related news and information .
- Evaluate credibility of sources you gather in producing your report .

3.1 Information and communication technologies

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been at the center of much health care delivery improvement efforts for the past decade, due in part to the unparalleled development in ICTs and the unprecedented rates at which these technologies are transforming our lives and shaping our future (OECD, 2010). Indeed, the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web (see table 4 at the end of this section for a comparison of the features of Web 1.0, 2.0, and the proposed 3.0) has created opportunities for improved health care delivery by transcending temporal and spatial constraints of information exchange by delivering text, data, images, audio, and video online; and facilitating synchronized and asynchronized communications; but it also has given rise to newer communication challenges (Ahmed & Bates, 2013). On the



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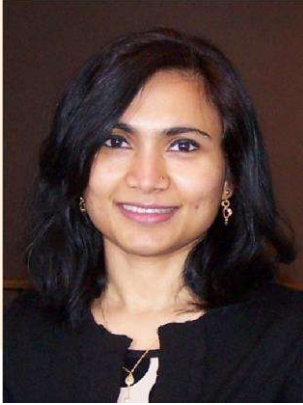
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Dr . Rukhsana Ahmed is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Ottawa. Her research embraces the cross/trans/inter-disciplinary nature of communication scholarship, with specific focus on exploring the role of communication processes in improving health outcomes among marginalized communities and promoting broader social changes in international health contexts. Dr. Ahmed received the Top 5 Paper Award in Health Communication at the 2006 Eastern Communication Association Annual

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