

## **Covering Health Issues: The Role of Newspapers in Ghana**

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### **Abstract**

*Enhancing the quality of health of Ghanaians is central to the ability of the country to create and maintain a healthy pool of labor force for its socio-economic development as well as enabling people to live in dignity. The media can influence people with relevant information to empower them in their health-seeking behavior and attitudes. Through a content analysis of three newspapers – Daily Graphic, Ghanaian Times, and Public Agenda – this paper interrogates how Ghanaian newspapers portray shared understandings of issues and problems of health through framing of newspaper articles to empower readers towards attainment of greater health. The paper examines how health issues are framed and the kinds of solutions offered to address them.*

**Key Words:** Framing of health problems, health-seeking behavior, health issues, shared understanding of health issues.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the study is to content analyses Ghanaian news media to determine how they empower people with knowledge on health issues in order to achieve greater health. The media plays a central role in fostering development. Several scholars have attested to this fact, for example, (Lerner, 1965; Everret, 1962; Wilbur, Schramm, 1946). Health is one of the sectors of the Ghanaian economy “topping the agenda” of developmental challenges, along with others such as education and climate change issues (Gadzekpo, 2010, p. 72-88). Therefore, it is important to investigate how the print media address health issues in Ghana. Such an investigation will show how the Ghanaian media are contributing to efforts by various stakeholders to ensure quality health for all persons. News media can play a critical role in awareness and education on public issues and probably influence decisions about health policies and medical care. Despite the crucial role of the media can play in the health sector no critical assessment of print media coverage of the health issues has been undertaken.

### **Relevance of Media in Public’s Health Knowledge**

At the global level progress on health-related targets has been much slower, however, with many countries likely to miss MDGs on child and maternal mortality and on access to sanitation (IMF, 2012). In Ghana, even though the health status of Ghanaians has generally improved over the years, there are persistent policy-related issues that need to be addressed. These include: large gaps in access to health care between urban and rural as well as the rich and poor; gender gaps in access to healthcare due to poverty, deprivation and ignorance; absence of an appropriate legal framework for the health sector; high infant and maternal mortality; high morbidity and mortality from communicable diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis; increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases with high disability and mortality e.g. cancers, cardiovascular diseases; threats of epidemic-prone diseases and diseases of pandemic potential such as influenza; and low level of overall health expenditure and inadequate social protection (Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda, 2011).

The Ministry of Health through the Public Health Unit has over the years been promoting health education in various communities of the country. Given the challenges of healthcare service in Ghana, there is the need for strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration. The media can play a central role in promoting the knowledge of people on issues of health as well as shaping our understanding of medicine and science in general. Research has shown that “print media’s dissemination of health information is important in shaping public beliefs and possibly behavior” (Moyer, 1995, p. 147 161).

Print news in particular can be seen as an integral source of public policy depending on selection and presentation of issues. In other African countries, research has confirmed the strong association between exposure to family planning media messages and contraceptive use (Kiraga et al., 1996). Even though effective health reporting is needed to promote public knowledge and understanding of health-related issues, media reportage of on health in Ghana has not been high and in-depth as compared to other sectors such as politics and education. The initiative of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly to promote health reporting through the “Building Bridges: The Health Professionals and Journalists' Media Resource Project,” is a step in the right direction which must be supported and sustained. It is of utmost importance that the media and journalists in Ghana are at the forefront of engendering discourses on issues, and shaping public thought surrounding those issues through credible, timely, comprehensive and balanced dissemination of information. A responsible attitude to news presentation in newspapers would demand greater commitment by the media to project pertinent issues of health to empower readers.

### ***Materials and Methods***

The study employed content analysis of print editions of newspapers to investigate the effectiveness of newspapers as important platforms and sources of more in-depth information about health issues in Ghana. Three Ghanaian newspapers: the *Daily Graphic*, the *Ghanaian Times* and *Public Agenda* were selected for the study. While the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times* were selected because of their national reach and readership, the *Public Agenda*, which is a privately owned, is generally recognized as more inclined towards covering social and health related issues than the other private newspapers in Ghana.

Three main objectives guided the study:

1. To discover the image of the health sector being created by newspapers.
2. To examine how Ghanaian newspapers frame a shared understanding of health issues so as to empower readers to attain greater health status
3. To find out how health issues and problems are defined and the kind of solutions offered.

Three newspapers were considered for the study: the *Daily Graphic*, the *Public Agenda* and the *Ghanaian Times*. Three separate quarterly samples of 3 issues of each newspaper covering a period of between: 2003-2005 were randomly drawn for the study. The period coincides with the implementation of the first phase of Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS 1), aspects of which contains a well structured and comprehensive health agenda for Ghana. Altogether 6 issues of each newspaper were sampled for each year, amounting to 54 issues of the three newspapers under consideration. This sample yielded a total of 154 relevant articles and stories on health. Each issue of the newspaper was read in order to identify health-related issues and themes. According to Babbie (1979, p. 129), who has written at length about scholarly research, “reliability refers to the degree to which a particular procedure enables one to collect the same data in repeated observations of the same phenomenon.” Holsti (1969, p.135) notes:

If research is to satisfy the requirement of objectivity, measures and procedures must be reliable; i.e, repeated measures with the same instrument on a given sample of data should yield similar results.

To assess inter-coder reliability, two people (the researcher and one well trained coder) coded the first 100 stories together to help in examining the codes. The inter-coder reliability based on percentage of agreement was assessed for the dominant issues/diseases, sources and types of articles until the procedures established an acceptable level of agreement of 83.69% agreement between the coders, and one researcher coded the remaining sample. An exploratory method was used to identify framing categories used in newspapers’ coverage of health issues. Frames, according to Entman (Entman, 2003, p. 390-339) “define problems”, “diagnose causes”, “make moral judgements” and “suggest remedies”. The concept of framing offers a way to describe the power of a communication text and refers to the manner journalists establish interpretative schemes in communication with their stakeholders within which those stories acquire meaning.

Therefore analyzing news frames in Ghanaian health stories provide a means by which we can determine within a given period how journalists have diagnosed, evaluated and prescribed solutions to the problems of public health. Similar questions Lovejoy (Lovejoy, 2007) raised were formulated, and according to typical framing categories to guide frame development for this study.

1. What diseases and health issues were highlighted?
2. What was blamed for these health issues?
3. How were the articles framed so as to empower readers to attain better health?

Each article was read to ascertain whether it contained empowering information. According to Bergsma (2004, p. 152-164), the feeling of empowerment is essential to one's health and well-being. Rappa port 1987, 121-148) defines empowerment as a by-product of what happens when health articles provide readers with specific means to gain control over their health problems and actively participate in a path towards attaining better health.

## Results

From the sample taken for the three-year period (2003-2005), 154 newspaper articles were published regarding health in Ghana. Of these, traditional straight news were 115 and 18 were features. Some features blended facts and comments on health issues, analyzing reality and its implications without necessarily making policy options. Diseases discussed in the articles were according to causes, symptoms and treatment and some recommendations were made to life style changes or foods - for example the July 1, 2004, p. 9 edition of the *Daily Graphic*. However, generally there were limited articles that discussed some diseases according to causes, symptoms and how to treat them by way of recommendations. During the period under review there were seven opinions and letters in the three newspapers.

As regards news sources, most news items (24.02 per cent) were taken from government official sources, 14.93 per cent from media, 10.39 per cent from professionals and interest groups, 9.74 per cent from Non-Governmental Organisations, 5.84 per cent from individuals, 5.19 per cent represented scientific research and 4.55 per cent from staff. Spokespersons represented 3.25 per cent, medical experts 2.60 per cent; anonymous sources, international organizations, and drug manufacturing companies and other corporations each were 1.27 per cent. An analysis of the distribution of articles across newspapers showed that the *Daily Graphic* published the highest number of articles on health, 85 (55.19 per cent) followed by 45 articles (29.22 per cent) in the *Ghanaian Times* and 26 (16.88 per cent) in the *Public Agenda*.

An essential component of the study was whether newspaper articles were framed in such a way as to enable readers adopt better health practices. Through an exploratory method the study sought to identify whether newspapers use two main framing categories – informational and medical in coverage of health in Ghana.

In assessing empowerment, despite its importance in providing readers with empowering health knowledge and information as demonstrated in the *Daily Graphic* it use was, however, hardly noticeable in the *Public Agenda* and *Ghanaian Times*. In a story titled: “Don't patronise these fake drugs” (*Daily Graphic* May 1, 2004, p. 14), the Food and Drugs Board advised readers not to buy “Mame Koryoe herbal mixture wonderful medicine,” which have been found to contain substances harmful to human health. Through such a medical intervention frame readers were encouraged to adopt certain attitudes in the way they use drugs or herbal medicines in order prevent themselves from acquiring some ailments.

Another equally important medical intervention frame for instance indicated how an international team of scientists and researchers at Mornash University in Melbourne, Australia has developed a new synthetic drug nicknamed Oz, which is set to become the major weapon in the fight against multi-drug resistant malaria and could be available to patients within three days, which appeared in the *September 1, 2004, p. 40* issue of the *Daily Graphic*. Notably in the three newspapers, the “informational frame” dominated the approach newspapers adopted in presenting information about health in the country. The *Daily Graphic* reported a story headlined: “Eye screening for Accra schools” in its March 1, 2004, p. 17 edition. Under the programme known as ‘Vision Forever,’ over 2000 students were expected to be treated by a team of three medical professors and some eight students.

Similar informational frame was used to present news to create awareness of a serious medical condition of a 3-year kid diagnosed with a life-threatening malignant tumor in the May 15, 2003, p. 13 edition of the *Ghanaian Times* headlined: “Please help Florence”. The newspaper appealed to the public to assist with donations to enable her undergo surgery at the Komfo Anokye Hospital in Kumasi. The heavy reliance on the traditional fact-based approach was a clear pointer that it was the most preferred model in which newspapers presented health information.

On framing the theme – “National Health Insurance Policy,” the *Ghanaian Time* issue August 2, 2004, p. 1 and the *Daily Graphic* of August 2, 2004, p.1, drew attention to the need for the levy collection of the 2.5% as approved by parliament on July 13, 2004 and challenges in the implementation of the scheme. As regards, the question of who to blame on issues of healthcare, the *Ghanaian Times*’ editorial - “Who is deceiving who?” of February 1, 2003, p.2 discussed how the exodus of health professional to seek greener pastures in other countries affect the health sector because their absence create a vacuum that is not easily filled. The paper “finds it difficult to understand such a development considering an increment of their duty allowance to 50%. The newspaper noted that the Council of Nurses Association statement that claimed that despite the attrition and exodus of nurses from Public Health Service the government appears not to have the goodwill to curb the trend “was much of a sweeping statement.” The *Public Agenda* highlighted the issue of the “Exodus of health workers” in the April 19-25, 2004, pp. 19-25 and June 1, 2005, p. 7 editions. The same issue was also covered in the August 2, 2004, p. 1 issue of the *Daily Graphic*.

On types of health problems in the three newspapers, major diseases and illnesses highlighted were: HIV/AIDS was mentioned in most articles (37 times) followed by cardiovascular diseases such as stroke, malaria (4 times). The third most mentioned disease was tuberculosis (3 times). Tumour, ebola, guinea worm, trachoma, measles, erectile dysfunction, hydrocephalus, leprosy and urinary tract infection were all mentioned once only.

### **Discussion**

The study was conducted to show how newspaper cover health issues in order to create a shared understanding of issues and problems of health in Ghana. Newspaper coverage of diseases included malaria, HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular diseases and eye infections. In covering these disease situations and events, the stories examined were mainly cased in the informational frame to create awareness on them and the knowledge necessary to take action. The fact that almost all the stories were cased in the informational frame is an evidence of the gap in specialized health coverage of particular ailments the media. Given the prevalence of lifestyle diseases such as stroke, hypertension, the capacity of newspapers to give special attention on such ailments on regular basis would give hope to people/readers through furnishing them with useful information to overcome the threat of such diseases. There is the possibility that in presenting straight news accounts on vital health issues from the lens of the informational frame, most articles could be one-sided. Nonetheless, such stories provided a feeling of shared understanding of health problems afflicting the Ghanaian society.

Beyond the creation of awareness, which is crucial on influencing people’s behavior and health-seeking attitudes, in general the stories analyzed were quite deficient in using the medical frame, which can provide a strong theme of empowerment for readers. There were no special articles that provided readers with articles that treated diseases and ailments by their definition, causes, treatment and preventive measures and endorsed physical exercises, certain foods and herbs such as dark fruit to fight cancer. Therefore, in Ghanaian newspapers the typical framing process that Entman (2003, p.390-339) suggested is scarcely used in health reporting. It can hardly be discounted that some avid readers of newspapers apply recommendations from credible sources about how to manage some diseases. The non-prominence of the use of the medical frame in the Ghanaian print media landscape is a source of concern. The situation possibly suggests three things:

- First and foremost, the news media lacks sophistication in dealing with such issues
- The institutions in charge of health delivery and allied agencies seem not to be very proactive and innovative enough to engage the media to focus on the medical frame dimension or specialized health reporting in news discourses.

- Thirdly the current approach to health coverage relies more on event-driven news and less on enterprising journalistic approach to tackling health-related issues that can empower people with knowledge and skills and coping strategies of managing people's health conditions.

Even though the various newspapers published articles on some diseases and ailments – such as malaria, urinary tract infections and HIV/AIDS affecting Ghanaians and the quality and state of healthcare service, they did not point out clearly by naming who were to be blamed for the situation. However, it could be deduced from some of the sampled of stories analysed that fingers were being pointed at the government and health professionals for engaging in arguments regarding how to create and maintain an effective healthcare system in Ghana. Recognizing the need for better health services in Ghana, it is important key stakeholders of the health sector, especially the government and health professionals constantly collaborate and dialogue to find innovative ways to address the challenges of the health sector. The government has the responsibility to make sure that the health care system is not only well resourced but also the conditions of service and working environment are conducive enough to attract the right caliber of health professionals. While the government tries to make available requisite resources in the health sector, health professional need to appreciate government's efforts by working altruistically to promote the common good, which can positively influence the image of the health sector.

Newspapers in Ghana can do a better job of projecting health issues in meaningful frames that are not limited by inadequate space. Though the study's focus was not to assess space allocation to health issues as compared to other sectors, in analyzing health reporting in print media it emerged that that health news reporting was much limited in scope and depth as compared with other sectors such as political news and scandals. The observation is a confirmation of earlier studies that despite the instrumental role of the press, there is a dearth of scientific reporting in Ghanaian newspapers (Tuurosong 2005, p. 91-104); Kwansah-Aidoo 2003, p. 389-411; Nyame, 2000). As regards factors that might have accounted for the situation, Gadzekpo (2010, p. 72-88) observed: "In the highly competitive nature of multi-party democracy the logic and practice of journalism in Ghana is highly determined by a mix of political considerations and commercial interests. For most privately-owned newspapers especially, political news and scandal, considered as what often sells newspapers, routinely crowd out news about other important socio-economic happenings and developments in the country."

The study has a limitation of using newspapers alone to examine how health is reported. The readership of newspapers is generally concentrated around major cities and towns in Ghana. Given the fact that 46 percent of Ghanaian adults are illiterate, it is possible that newspapers miss the poor people with low earnings who can hardly afford one square meal a day let alone to purchase a newspaper or are hindered by their low literacy levels. Yet this segment of the population needs health messages that the media publish. Also the study made use of a limited sample of newspapers dealing with health issues in Ghana. The findings cannot be said to be representative of all health articles in Ghanaian print media, including magazines and newsletters.

### ***Conclusion***

Despite these limitations, the study showed that Ghanaian newspapers create awareness on health matters through the publication of straight news stories. Though these straight news accounts may be one-sided, they can provide a shared understanding of some of the serious health problems confronting our society. The inadequacy of specialized health reporting across public and private newspapers means that diseases and ailments could hardly be well framed as problem that can be solved through medical and scientific knowledge.

The media can play an important role in not only stimulating discussion on the problems and challenges of the health situation of our society, more importantly if the stories are effectively framed they can serve as very good sources of empowerment and direction towards greater health. Therefore, it is important newspaper establishments, health agencies and institutions, and schools of communication studies collaborate and devise strategies on how best to equip journalists with specialized knowledge and skills to enable them write articles on health problems based on their expertise on such issues. Further research should investigate coverage of health in the Ghanaian print media as well as on radio and television targeted at specific audiences.

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