

A study of challenges in health reporting

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ABSTRACT

Health journalism is the dissemination of health and medical information and related subjects in the media. But covering health is not as easy as other beats of reporting. Most inaccuracies in news coverage of health can be attributed to several barriers such as lack of knowledge by reporters, lack of time to prepare proper report and lack of space in publication. Most news articles fail to discuss important factors of the health issues. Hence, present study is an attempt to know the demographic and educational background of the health reporters and to ascertain the problems they face during health coverage.

Key Words : Health journalism, Reporting, Problems in health reporting, Health beat

INTRODUCTION

Newspaper plays a vital role in providing complex information into simplest form. Nowadays, many researches have been carried out in the health sector to resolve problem of many diseases. Media is an important institution to disseminate those information which are outcome of these researches to prevent diseases. Mass media educates the public about the health issues, diseases, conditions and health risk factors. It has substantial power in setting agendas, that is, what we should be concerned about and takes an action on, and framing issues, that is, how we should think about them. In a developing country like India, press serves a multiplicity role. It is a medium to educate the people, the source of information, and an institution of social change in a particular way as stated above. Media plays role not even to providing information but media has potential to change attitude and behavior regarding decision making of the policy makers.

Presently, approximately 150 television channels and more than one lac newspapers and magazines are being published in India, but still, millions of people get into the grip of diseases only due to lack of awareness. Hence, it can be said that the Indian media is not giving space to health issues as much as it should give. In view of this problem, the current research is an attempt to ascertain what kind of problems health journalists face during coverage of health issues.

Review of literature :

It is noticed that newspaper plays an important role in the awareness of epidemics and shaping public opinion. A research conducted by Tong Jing Jing on U.S. and Chinese newspaper framing

AIDS. The New York Times and the China Daily demonstrated a consistent coverage in AIDS issues in their own country. The study reveals that China Daily newspaper defeat New York Times in AIDS coverage. Seth M. Noar argues that mass media campaigns in health over the past ten years have taken greater advantage of a variety of theories, and this is a positive development. Health is prerequisite for overall economic and social development of a nation (Rasika and Timothy, 2007). Communication media provide information regarding health matters but political, social, sports and crime news were primarily covered in the electronic media in India.

Achala Gupta and Sinha conducted a study on health coverage in mass media. Content analysis method was used to analyze health related message that appear in the print media and electronic media. After content analysis of whole years (2008) newspaper they found that the coverage of political subject is the most preferred area of news. Health coverage by newspaper took place on third.

Teixeira *et al.* conducted a study on reporting on health issues in prestigious Brazilian newspapers. An electronic version of Folha de São Paulo and O Estado de São Paulo newspaper were selected and only article mentioned medical research were included. As a result they found that Folha de São Paulo published scientific research article related to health was 57 per cent, while Estado de São Paulo newspaper covered only 20 per cent of health related articles over the whole. they concluded that Folha de São Paulo tends to write its own article and more frequently published the result and Estado de São Paulo publishes article that originate in news agencies. Above studies depicts that coverage of health issues is much lesser than political and other crime issues. Many factors are work while health reporting. It may be the health reporters face problem in health reporting. This study is an attempt to know, which factors are working behind of low health coverage in newspaper.

Objectives of the study :

This study reveals the following aims:

- To know the demographic background of the health reporters.
- To find out which beats reporter covers along with health.
- To know most frequent health issue being covered by journalists.
- To ascertain how health journalists understand medical terms which they are not clear.
- To know journalists willingness of special training for health reporting.

METHODOLOGY

For this descriptive study, the researcher chooses 50 health journalists working in six newspapers in 2018. With the expert view of Editor Dainik Jagran newspaper, researcher developed a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained questions pertaining to personal and demographic characteristics and questions on professional characteristics of health journalists. Age, sex, gender, education and professional education counts in demographic questions. Professional questions include areas of health reporting, problems in health reporting, training and willingness to receive health training.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To achieve the objectives of research the data was collected using a structured questionnaire from the health journalists working in Haryana. The collected data was tabulated using SPSS

software and presented using tables, to draw relevant interpretations.

Table: 1 Education background of the journalists

Education	Frequency	Percentage
Arts	12	24
Science	5	10
Journalism	28	56
Other	5	10
Total	50	100

The table given above shows the educational background of the selected journalist under this study. The data reveals that majority of the journalist belongs from the journalism background which accounts to 56 per cent of the total respondent journalists, whereas art backgrounds ranks number two (24 %), as far as educational background of the health journalist is concerned. 10 per cent of the total health reporters are from the science educational background also working on the health beat. It is worth mentioning here that health journalism is closely associated with the science subject, so it may be said that reporters who are from the science educational background may cover health issues more proficiently than the other journalists.

Table 2 : Topics they report along with health

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Political	34	68
Education	33	66
Administration	30	60
Crime	21	42
Sports	20	40
Court	15	30
Other	8	16

An attempt as been made to know which beats health journalists are covering along with the health beat. The data in above tables reveals that majority of the journalists are covering on political, educational and administration beat along with the health beat. 68 per cent of the total reporters are covering political beat, whereas 66 per cent of the reporters are covering education along with the health beat, administration beat is also being covered by the so many reporters along with health beat which accounts to 60 per cent of the total reporters. Crime is covered by 42 per cent reporters, followed by sports and court 40 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively.

Table 3 : Most frequent health issue covered by the reporters

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Health care services	32	64
Dengue	30	60
Viral Disease	28	56
Medicine	21	42
Tuber Clauses	7	14
Cancer	5	10
Heart	4	8
Other	5	10

The table above shows the most frequent health issue covered by the health reporter selected as respondents under this study. The data reveals that 64 per cent of the respondents hold the view that they cover health care services most frequently, while 60 per cent reporters said that they covers dengue most frequently. Viral disease is covered by most frequently by the health reporters as much as 56 per cent. 42 per cent reporters opine the view that they covered issues related to medicine most frequently while Tuber Clauses is covered by 14 per cent health reporters most frequently. Cancer and heart disease are also covered most frequently by reporters 10 and 8 per cent, respectively.

Problem	Frequency	Percentage
Language	24	48
Source	12	24
Time management	9	18
Risk of illness	7	14
Transportation	0	0

Above table shows the responses of the reporters about the problems which they face during health issues coverage. This is the startling revelation of the research that majority of the health reporters consider medical vocabulary as the problem while they cover health issues, because they are not familiar some words of the medical field which they face in their day to day life during their job. 48 per cent reporters said that understanding medical terms is one of the biggest problem they face during health issues coverage. Getting news from the reliable sources is another problem for the health reporters which accounts to 24 per cent. Another challenge for the health reporters is completing and submitting news stories within the time, because sometime due to lack of time exclusive news are left and sometime they reach to other reporters. 18 per cent health reporters consider time management as a problem while reporting health. Sometime health reporters get in the grip of disease due to the infection because they have to spend a lot of time in hospitals every day. 14 per cent of the health reporters opine that risk of getting ill is another problem in health reporting.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Talk to Doctor	34	68
keep faith in source	5	10
Use internet	3	6
Both doctor and internet	8	16
Total	50	100

It is attempted to know how health reporters understand medical terms which they do not know during health reporting. 68 per cent of reporters said that the talk to the doctors if they face such terms, while only 10 per cent reporters said that they do not try to understand any terms and only believe in their source. 6 per cent health reporters said they use the internet to understand the terms or words which they do not know, while 16 per cent health reporters said that they talk to the doctor and use internet as well to understand such medical terms.

Table 6 : Reporters willingness of special training		
Response	Yes	Percentage
Need Special Training	34	68
Willingness of health training	16	32

It is clear from the many studies that there is a lack of professional reporters in health field who can write health stories more proficiently. It was an attempt to know whether health reporters need any special training to cover the health beat. It is startling revelation of the study that 68 per cent health reporters said that the need such special training whereas 32 per cent health reporters are willing to attend such training for the better coverage of the health issues.

Table 7 : Preference of reporters regarding training		
Response	Frequency	Percentage
Workshop	37	74
Conference	13	26
Exchange programs	27	54
Textbooks and pamphlets	13	26

It was asked to the health reporters what kind of training they prefer to attend for health journalism. 74 per cent of the health reporters said that workshop is their preference as a mode of training, while 26 per cent health reporters prefer conference. Exchange program can also be a good method for the health training for health reporters. 54 per cent health reporters said that they prefer exchange programs for the training. Such training or knowledge can be disseminate through providing related book, study material or pamphlets. 26 per cent health reporters consider this method of training as their preferred mode of training.

Major findings :

Participant journalist in this study was very young. More than 62 per cent participant journalists are 26-35 years old, and majority of them are male, only a few female journalist are working on health beat. Majority of journalist participants in this study are graduates or post graduates, however most of them did not possess any professional training for health journalism.

The present study reveals that reporters are covering health along with other beat such as, crime, political, sports, education and administration. Another revelation of this study is that there is no special journalist for health reporting because they are reporting other beats also.

While health reporting majority of journalists are facing language problem related to medical terminology. To solve problem of medical language and terminology they prefer to discuss with doctor. Majority of health journalists mentioned the main problem in health reporting is time management and understanding medical terms. To cope up these problems health reporters are seeking health trainings for the better coverage of the health issues.

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