

Reproductive Health Stories Coverage in the Punch newspaper between June 2015 and May 2016

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Abstract

The mass media have an important role to play in the development of the society, and it should be limited to only the economic and social state of the society. the mass media can be used to disseminate health related information. It is on this note that the researcher sought to find out if newspapers, which are one of the means of communication played any role in making issues regarding reproductive health public. That is in essence to know if

newspapers cover or report reproductive health stories. The agenda setting theory was used for the study. Content analysis was the research design adopted and The Punch newspaper was purposively selected out of the top ten newspapers in Nigeria. Based on a constructed calendar of every eight days, 46 issues of the newspaper published between June 2015 and May 2016 made up the sample. The findings of the study revealed that The Punch Newspaper reports stories on reproductive, but however did not give them prominence. It also revealed that the frequency of reportage or coverage was poor. The paper recommends that reproductive health issues should be given prominence and reported more considering how vital such information is to the members of the public.

Introduction

The mass media can be used to disseminate information intended to improve the lives of a group of people. This improvement can be in their social life, academics, health, economic wellbeing, or very facet of their life. Development communication as a field of study is concerned with the use of different forms of communication to bring about change in the society, that will in turn foster development at the local, state or national level (Melkote and Steeves, 2014). It is the type of audience that determines the medium to be used for disseminating the message. The message must be factual in order for it to move people to the point of adoption and be repeated often in such a way that it registers in the minds of people. The media can achieve this by setting agenda that is frequent presentation of the issues that matter in the society. They believe that the quality of information available and its wide dissemination are key factors in the speed and smoothness of development.

The importance of communication in bringing about change in the society cannot be over emphasized, as it is capable of changing the attitudes and perceptions of the people through the information they get

from the mass media and other sources. Currently, it is being advocated for the use of integrated communications systems to reach members of public with ideas that can transform their lives. This is as a result of the fact that there are people who do not get their information from the mass media, but from friends and family. Development communication has been defined by McPhail (2009) as the process of intervening in a systematic or strategic manner with either media (print, radio, telephony, video, and the internet), or education (training, literacy, schooling) for the purpose of positive social change (p3). From the above, what comes to mind is the fact that through the mass media and interpersonal communication, changes can be achieved. Melkote and Steeves and McPhail agree that communication is a catalyst to development and that an effective application of it can make people to accept and adopt new ideas. This application of communication to enhance development gave rise to the field of study known as development communication or devcom. There are various channels that can be used to communicate change, but only the mass media, especially the electronic with their ability for instantaneous report, can be used to reach a scattered audience. This is possible as result of the technological devices they use for transmission, which allows signals to travel far and wide. In carrying out their operation, they are guided by the fact their programmes are packaged in a way that they educate, inform, enlighten, orientate and have the capacity to mobilise members of the public by talking about trending and important issues. Newspapers are one the various types of print media available in the society and can also be used for the dissemination of vital information that can change the lives of the masses. They have an important role play in fostering development in any given society.

In order for newspapers to achieve this feat, they must consider themselves as viable tools for the achievement of set goals that are geared towards change and development. Health is an important aspect of the

society and should be talked about in the media in general. When newspapers disseminate health information, they are said to be engaged in health communication.. Through communication, health issues affecting people can be made public, as such communication provides information on how they can be prevented, treated or managed in cases where they have gone viral. As Schiavo (2007), puts it:

Health communication as a multifaceted and multidisciplinary approach to reach different audience and share health related information with the goal of influencing, engaging, and supporting individuals, communities, health professionals, special groups, policy makers and the public to champion, introduce, adopt, or sustain a behaviour, practice, or policy that will ultimately improve health outcomes (p. 7).

Every health-related communication message is packaged with so much information and with intent to influence or encourage people to adopt healthy lifestyle or positive practice. Communicating health in any society is important owing to the fact that only healthy people can contribute positively to economic growth. Ajakaiye and Mwabu (2010) in their report on the relationship between reproductive health and economic growth in Kenya observe that healthy people have an incentive to use their vigour to innovate and create development opportunities for themselves. This draws attention to how important it is for a country to have a healthy populace if it hopes to achieve any form of development.

World Health Organisation (WHO) says that reproductive health ‘implies that people are able to have a responsible, satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide to, if, when and how often to do so’. This definition is encompassing, because it indicates that reproductive health is more than

the process involved in having children. There are so many issues to be considered when it comes to mind, for instance, pregnancy, unwanted pregnancies, antenatal and post natal care, abortion and post abortion care, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, family planning, the use of contraceptives, infertility among others. This paper however considered the coverage of reproductive health stories by The Punch newspaper.

Statement of the Problem

Reproductive health according to the World Health Organisation is concerned about the right of people to have a healthy sex life, the right to do what they want and when they want. It also states that people have the right to be informed, that is they should have access to information regarding their reproductive system. Over time, the researcher noticed that there were a lot of reports, campaigns and jingles in the broadcast media on reproductive health issues, which are either meant for the purpose of creating awareness or encouraging the public to engage in healthy practices. This paper, therefore, sought to know if the print media, in this case the Punch newspaper, does report stories that have to do with the reproductive health issues.

Objectives of the study

Below are the objectives of the study:

1. To determine if reproductive health stories were given prominence in The Punch newspaper between June 2015 and May 2016.
2. To ascertain the frequency of reportage of reproductive health stories in The Punch newspaper between June 2015 and May 2016
3. To Find out the types of reproductive health issues that were mainly reported in The Punch newspaper between June 2015 and May 2016.

Research questions

The research questions of the study were derived from the objective stated above.

1. Did *The Punch* newspaper give prominence to stories on reproductive health between June 2015 and May 2016?
2. What was the frequency of reportage of reproductive health stories in *The Punch* newspaper between June 2015 and May 2016?
3. What types of reproductive health stories that were mainly reported in *The Punch* newspaper between June 2015 and 2016?

Review of related literature

Concepts relevant to the study are reviewed here.

The theory used for the study was the agenda setting theory. The theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1970s. The theory simply points to the fact the media has some form of effects on the audience based on the type of story they decide to make prominent or keep silent about. The media does not tell people what to think, but they can give them issues or topics to think about. This is achieved through the placement of stories and the airtime given for such stories. Baran (2004) says that the agenda setting power of the media resides in more than the amount of space or time devoted to a story and its placement in the broadcast or on the page of papers (p.429). This means that agenda setting is more than the prominence given to a story, it is achieved by talking about it over a period of time and consistently. The number of times the issue is discussed in the media is what attracts the attention of people to it. Baran (2004 p. 430) asserts that it is through consistency and repetition of stories that signal people the importance of issues or events. McCombs (2004) also agrees with Baran on this, by saying that for all the news media, the repetition of a topic day after day is the most important powerful message of all about its importance. When quite a number of media now decide to hammer on a particular topic/issue daily over a period of time, they are invariably telling

members of the public that issue should not be pushed aside. The theory was chosen because the researcher intends to find out if the media, especially newspapers have been able to set agenda for the public regarding reproductive health issues.

Role of media in development

The media as the fourth estate of the society are expected to make positive contributions towards nation building through the kinds of programmes they air or stories published. Servaes (2008) opines that when it comes to the context of development, communication media can be generally used to support development initiatives, by the dissemination of messages that encourage the public to support development-oriented projects. Here, the media can be used to raise the awareness of the masses regarding issues that have to do with reproductive health. This they can do this by the repetition of messages that can take any form (advertisements, jingles, dramas, commercial, campaigns etc) to support a particular cause that can improve their lives. By covering stories about health issues all the time, people will begin to ponder on whatever they have been exposed to. Mefalopulous has the following to say about the role media plays in development:

Once an issue has been investigated and the design of a project or program completed, there is still a major role for communication. If used professionally as part of a broader effort, communications and media can play a key role in informing stakeholders and promoting specific changes in the level of awareness, knowledge, attitude, or behaviors of key audiences (2008, p 68).

He is of the opinion that the media can be use to communicate information that transform the lives of all members of the society. If people are well informed about issues that affect them negatively, they can decide to embrace positive measures that will lead to change. Stakeholders in this context could mean individuals, the government, media houses, policy makers, health, and care providers. Asemah (2011, p.44) asserts to this by saying that 'the mass media generally have messages that are meant for instruction and teaching. The mass media broaden and deepen one's perspective'. Moemeka (2000) also agrees with the other authors on the role the media can play in the society.

Media can help concentrate public attention on a subject or goal. They can therefore be employed to keep the populace thinking about development, to make the people recognize and accept the need for development; in short, they can help set the development agenda (p173).

By constantly covering and reporting stories on reproductive health issues, the media can set agenda for the public. When people realise how important it is for them to have a healthy reproductive lifestyle and its impact on the development of the society, then they will be keen to adopt practices that will keep them safe. This will in turn lead to development, because the health of a people can affect the society adversely if not managed properly. The United Nations (2007, p.5) asserts to this by stating that health is a key component of human capital, which in turn is an important determinant of economic growth.

Mass media and health

The mass media has a lot of contribution to makes towards promoting healthy practices among members of the public. This is important considering how much can be achieved when it comes to the

development of a country. The capacity of the media to reach a scattered, heterogeneous audience simultaneously can be neglected or exploited to encourage positive development. Zarcadoolas, Pleasant and Greer (2009) had the following to say about the role of the media in promoting health.

The mass media present both complex and overtly simplistic health messages. They can improve health literacy or reduce health literacy.

The mass media can positively or negatively influence the activity level, world view and dietary habits of their audience. Mass media can educate individuals about health behavior or establish powerful role models for harmful behavior (p93).

The above definition gives us a clue of how powerful the media can be in terms of influencing members of the public through its activities. With them, relevant information regarding health that can influence the behavior and choices of the people can be disseminated. Members of the public can be brought up to date on health innovations and Improvements which will be of immense benefit to them. In order to meet their target of keeping the masses informed, media practitioners are expected to know how each of the medium operate. As this is the way through which they can utilise the various media effectively, to achieve their goals.

It is true that the media inform, explain, and frame health news, they may help people in making decisions towards their own health. Then it should be 'accurate', balanced and complete as the public should be informed and ready to participate (2012).

The author cited above makes reference to how the media by carrying out its functions can influence the health decisions of individuals. They can achieve this by disseminating accurate information about health. There must be verification and scrutinisation of information before they are broadcast to ascertain there is no trace of doubt or falsification of facts that can lead the people astray. Baggott (2015) asserts to this by saying that the media tends to concentrate on dramatic health threats, irrespective of the level of risks involved'. This means that media houses often have area of interest when it comes to the coverage of health news stories which may not be in the interest of its mass audience. The way media decide to present health stories has a lot to do with the interpretation the audience will give to such stories.

Considering how important it is for members of the public to be kept informed and educated about health issues by the media, this should always guide their operation. Arulchelvan (2016) is of the opinion that there should be an increase in media coverage of health stories knowing the kind of influence they are capable of having on individuals.

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. But the media coverage of health problems is not a reflection of the health issues that are most prominent in society (p. 175).

The mass media through its dedicated coverage and dissemination of health stories can promote the adoption of healthy practices among members of the public.

Media messages are expected to promote healthy behaviour by providing information and encouragement towards achieving

changes in the behaviour of the populace. This can only be achieved if the media does routine coverage of health-related topics has often (though not always) been linked with other moral and political agendas (Seale 2012, p.2)

Media coverage of health issues

Mass media is expected to share information that is important and beneficial to members of the public. Journalism is the profession that handles the gathering, processing and dissemination of information to members of the public. Omega and Ochonogor (2013) refer to journalism as a social activity that engages people who are involved in the business of writing and preparing messages meant for dissemination to the public. Health journalism is an aspect of journalism that has to do with writing reports or stories that are health related for dissemination to the public. Hinnant (2009) sees it as a means of communicating health to the public (p.693). It has to do with the process of sending messages that are related to health. According to Rita and Lopes health journalism has to do with the gathering, writing and editing stories that are centred on health for dissemination to members of the public by the media. This shows that health stories are put together with the sole aim of educating and informing members of the public. Uzuegbunam, Duru, Okafor and Ugbo define it as (also known as medical journalism) the gathering and reporting of facts about health in the society via the media (2016, p 29). Health journalism is an aspect of journalism that has its own features and should be guided by the general principles of the journalism practice. They feel that health-related reports should be 'accurate', 'balanced' and 'complete' (p110). The journalist at every point in time, is expected to make sure that the details of every story is not distorted in any way and that there is a presentation of all sides/ perspectives of the story. This invariably means that there is opportunity to capture the minds of individuals through the type of report they disseminate. For Hinnant

(2009) health journalism is a primary source of information for consumers to know about personal health as well as medical development and new research (692). Health education is one role that health journalism plays, of which health journalists are conscious (p.32). For Cole (2008) reproductive health is concerned with the following:

Family planning, prevention of maternal and newborn deaths and disabilities, prevention and management of sexually transmitted disease and aids, harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), rape, domestic violence, forced prostitution and human trafficking, infertility, malnutrition and anaemia, osteoporosis, uterine prolapsed, reproductive tract infections and cancers (pp 131).

Methodology

Content analysis was the research design adopted for the study. This is because the paper required studying the manifest content the newspaper chosen. The study population was the top ten newspapers published in Nigeria. The Punch newspaper was purposively selected as a result of its consistency in the news stand and the variety of contents that it carries. A constructed calendar of every eight days was used to get a sample of 46 issues between June 2015 and May 2016 (the study period).

The content categories for the analysis were family planning, pregnancy, maternal and neonatal mortality, STI/HIV/ AIDs, Malaria, female genital mutilation and rape, while the units of analysis were news, features, editorials, column/opinions, and advertisements.

- Family planning: any story that talks about child spacing, and how it can be achieved either by use of contraceptives or condoms.
- Pregnancy: any issues that pertains to conception, antenatal care and delivery

- **Maternal and neonatal mortality:** death of a woman as a result of pregnancy related complication either during the course of the pregnancy or after delivery and death of babies that are between 0-5years of age.
- **STI/HIV/AIDs:** sexually transmitted infections, human immunodeficiency virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency syndrome.
- **Malaria:** a disease caused by mosquito bites that causes fever and can lead to death.
- **Female genital mutilation:** it is the traditional practice in some cultures that involves the total or partial removal the external genitals of girls or women.
- **Rape:** it is the involves having sexual intercourse with somebody forcefully or without their assent.

Data presentation and analysis

The data was gathered from the 46 issues of The Punch newspaper analysed . the data was presented in tables and simple percentages.

Table on the placement of reproductive health stories in the Punch newspaper between June 2015 and May 2016

Content Category	Front page	Inside page	Centre spread	Inside back page	Back page	Total
Pregnancy	X	5	X	X	X	5
Family Planning	X	2	X	X	X	2
Maternal/Neonatal Mortality	X	10	X	X	X	10
STI/HIV/AIDs	X	5	X	X	X	5
Malaria	X	1	X	X	X	1

FGM	X	X	X	X	X	-
Rape	X	14	1	X	1	16
Total	-	37	1	-	1	39

From the table above, the placement of stories in the Punch newspaper between June 2015- May 2016 shows that most of the stories were placed on inside pages, while centre spread and back page had a story each. Even though issues regarding reproductive health were covered by the newspaper, but they were however not given prominence. This is in terms of where they were placed in the newspaper within the study period. A greater part of the stories were on rape.

Discussion of findings

The research questions were answered using the information in the table above.

1. Did *The Punch* newspaper give prominence to stories on reproductive health between June 2015 and May 2016?

From the data presented above it is obvious that The Punch newspaper during the study period actually reported or covered stories that had to do with reproductive health, but however did not give them prominence. This is as a result of the fact that 37 out of the 39 stories published appeared on the inside pages of the newspaper. That the stories did not appear on strategic pages of the newspaper however did not hinder it from making such issues public. This work has also confirmed the fact that newspapers do report health, especially reproductive health. It lends credence to what Hinnant (2009) said about health journalism being a primary source of information for consumers to know about personal health as well as improvement and new developments in the medical world.

2. What was the frequency of reportage of reproductive health stories in *The Punch* newspaper between June 2015 and May 2016?

Reproductive health stories were reported 39 times from June 2015 - May 2016. The frequency of reportage is however poor considering how important this aspect of health in the development and growth of any country. For Arulchelvan (2016) says that there should be an increase in media coverage of health stories knowing the kind of influence they are capable of having on individuals. The author further states that media coverage of health problems is not a reflection of the health issues that are most common in the society. This is likely as a result the fact that not everything that happens in the society get to be reported by the media, which could be because they are not aware or that the newspaper does not consider them to be news worthy. The frequency of reportage of rape was very high, followed by pregnancy and nothing on female genital mutilation.

3. What types of reproductive health stories were mainly reported in *The Punch* newspaper from June 2015 to May 2016?

According to the information in the table, the frequency at which the content categories were reported in *The Punch* newspaper are: pregnancy - 5; family planning - 2; maternal and neonatal mortality - 10; STI/HIV/AIDs - 5; malaria - 1; FGM - 0, and rape - 16. It can be deduced that the rate at which the stories were reported is an indication of how often such issues occur in the society and the aspect that the newspaper is interested in. Rape stories were more in number, followed by the matters about the death of mothers and babies. Malaria which is a major killer of people was only talked about once and nothing on female genital mutilation which is barbaric practice still going on in the society.

Summary of findings

The findings of the are as follows:

1. The Punch newspaper did not give prominence to reproductive health stories with June 2015 and May 2016.
2. Reproductive health stories were reported only 39 times in the Punch newspaper from June 2015 to May 2016.

3. The reproductive health issues that were mainly are presented from the one with the highest number to the lowest – rape; maternal and neonatal mortality; ,pregnancy and STI/HIV/AIDs; family planning; malaria, and female genital mutilation.

Conclusion and recommendations

The media, especially newspapers have an important role to play in the dissemination of information that can bring about a change in the perceptions of the people and also in the development of the society. Newspapers are also a good channel for health journalism, and this study has shown that *The Punch* newspapers is aware of the part it has to play in society which is what necessitated its coverage of reproductive health issues. The frequency of coverage was poor, since it is only through constant repetitions that the media is able to set agenda for members of the public.

The researcher recommends that *The Punch* newspaper should endeavour to treat reproductive health issues as important and news worthy. This they can achieve by placing the stories on front page, back page or centre. The placement of the stories is as important as its coverage.

It also feels that *The Punch* newspaper should increase the frequency at which reproductive health stories are covered, as this will give them ample opportunity to keep the masses updated about what is new in this area.

The newspaper should channel its resources towards the coverage of non dramatic stories, as data showed that rape stories were reported more than any other content category.

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