

Journalism and the Public Health

**Commission of Inquiry on Hormone
Receptor Testing**

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Outline

1. "The role of media" and ethics
 - informing and watchdog roles
 - democratic basis for roles
2. Context for public health journalism
 - general conditions and obstacles
 - application to disclosure process
3. Criteria for evaluating media performance and some suggestions
4. What might be done..?

“Role” talk

Presumes social role with duties – what *ought* to do for citizens of democracy.

Traditional liberal theory of press:

1. Inform on essential issues to empower

2. Represent public to government – “fourth estate”

3. Protector of liberties; watchdog on power

4. Forum for views; spark engagement.

1. & 3. are especially relevant. On this view, *public health journalism* protects public by keeping officials accountable; and helping public understand issues so as to judge/act in a more informed manner.

Journalism and democracy

The Elements of Journalism, Kovach and Rosenstiel

Information for free and self-governing citizens; primary allegiance is to the public at large

- “Whenever editors lay out a page or website, or people decide what angle or element of an event or issue to emphasize ... they are guessing at what readers want or need to know . . . they are operating by some theory of democracy—some theory of what drives politics, citizenship and how people make judgments” (p. 23).

Codes of ethics

Society of Professional Journalists (USA)

Preamble: SPJ believes that “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.”

Codes of ethics

Canadian Association of Journalists

“The public has a right to know about its institutions and the people who are elected or hired to serve its interests.

“Defending the public’s interest includes . . .
protecting public health and safety and
preventing the public from being misled.

What do my students think?

- "A nation that considers itself a free and open democracy must encourage public debate and discourse and transparency and accountability in power holders.
- "Society must know what governing bodies and organizations are doing, and those bodies and organizations must know that the public will hold them accountable."



Examples of “public protection” journalism

- “Dirty Dining” in Toronto
- Walkerton
- Tasers and transit police
- Airport and airplane security
- Mount Cashel inquiry

Context for public health journalism (1)

Level One: Social-systemic factors

1. Culture – Understands and supports an open society. Decline in public credibility of media.
2. Supportive legal framework: protections for whistleblowers, anonymous sources, freedom-of-information laws?
3. Is government and bureaucracy a “culture of secrecy”?

Context for public health journalism (2)

Level Two: The media culture

1. Complexity of public sphere – Any communication enters a manipulative, rhetorical arena. Many players/agendas
2. Media-saturated world: competition and hype
3. New forms of media: new possibilities, expectations, drawbacks

Context for public health journalism (3)

Level Two: The news media system

Newsroom restraints:

- Speed; brevity; deadlines; idea of “news”
- Under-resourced newsrooms
- Committed to public-interest journalism?

Individual restraints:

Increasing ‘knowledge’ demands

- Journalists who are ‘generalists’ lack skills to explain to question claims.

Interviews: Some themes (1)

Who writes about science and health? (print)

- 1. 60; few full-time; freelancers; general reporters
- 2. 47% -5-9 years; 26% -2 years or less; 11%-10 or more
- 3. Special training? 84% (no science degree) 0% (workshop in newsroom) 37% (no training); 26% took science/math;

What gets covered?

1. Health and medicine
2. Environment; natural resources; psychology, physics/astronomy;
3. Geology/archeology and "anything local";
4. "whatever is newsworthy."

Interviews: Some themes (2)

Sources of stories

1. Wires and embargoed journals
2. Researchers; press releases; web sites
3. Agencies (CIHR. Cancer Society)
4. Other news outlets and web sites
5. Events (outbreak of disease); PR, conferences; friends

What role for public health journalism?

Transmission: Transmit facts, views of experts.

Scientist/expert → Reporter → Public

Knowledge translation: “translate” between groups

Scientist ← Reporter → Public

Challenge of “new media”

1. “Interactive” communication, not transmission
2. Active audiences: own research and comparison.
3. Citizens don't just consume media they “are” the media; decline of professional dominance.
3. Stress on “social media” and sharing.
4. Stress on transparency, diversity and immediacy over verification and editing.

How do institutions that want a careful release of information respond to expectations of transparency?

How can interactive media be accurate, contextual, educational? Can it allow citizens' to participate in an informed, inclusive manner?

Implications/applications

Improvements to public health communication and journalism not impossible. But any "model" needs to take into account these complexities and potential obstacles.

Take for example, a public disclosure process.....

Disclosure and the public

Ideally, a staged, careful process whereby disclosure moves from

(a) institution

(b) patients

(c) citizens at large (via media)

Issues are those of timing/content and developing a working relationship with journalists in question.

In the real world....

- Staged release of information is difficult. May be leaked to media first! In Internet world, few 'secrets' kept for long.
- In the "crunch," process may fail, if no severe penalties; legal and other concerns may prohibit full disclosure; "communication strategies" minimize or re-direct blame. Media again become part of an unstructured process to obtain data.
- Professionals and journalists lack sufficient trust
- The disclosure process may be mistakenly viewed as a tradition transmission of facts of experts to a public via media, in a relatively passive, top-down fashion.

Criteria of evaluation of coverage (1)

Investigate responsibly

- Once story breaks: need sustained and deepening coverage, not “quick hits”.
- Stick to developing the trail of facts – don’t prejudge complex situations.
- Be careful of anonymous sources; cross-verify facts. Seek documents by all avenues.
- Give voice to all sides; and show the human face behind the statistics.

Criteria of evaluation of coverage (2)

Looking forward/widening the frame

1. Focus not only on individual officials but on structure/system.
2. Focus on public trust, accountability, and institutional governance.
3. Focus on prevention and responses
 - Are official inquiries sufficient?
 - How prevent in future – are corrective actions forthcoming?
 - What about other jurisdictions?

Criteria of evaluation of coverage(3)

Explaining and understanding

“Protecting” role implies an adversarial model where journalists force information to be made public.

Qualities of good coverage that explains: Four tiers

First-tier requirements: Accurate and complete

1. Factually and theoretically accurate
2. Clear and well-written for intended audience: between misleading simplicity and bewildering complexity
3. Diversity of relevant views/sources
4. Complete on essentials (relative to topic and space)

Second-tier requirements: Context

1. Uncertainty; state of research; unresolved issues; history
2. Creative and thought-provoking: metaphors; analogies.
3. Critical and independent: Aware of conflicts of interests; manipulation; lobby groups.

Third-tier requirements: “Implications”

1. Why important? Ethical and other issues; downsides; impacts
2. Public response? What are the policy options; how can public participate?

Fourth tier: Self-reflective journalism

- Aware of one’s “frames”

What needs to be done? (1)

1. Research/education/training

- Science/health journalism education
- Specific research: How people interpret scientific and health information; how to communicate risk or uncertainty.
- Training in public communication based on understanding of public sphere.

2. Ethics of public communication: What goals? What are the primary concerns? How handle difficult situations?

What needs to be done? (2)

2. Develop “participatory” public communication

- Interaction of “two cultures” e.g. workshops, fora, disclosure model developed.
- Beyond transmission to using media to engage public in deliberation. Allow citizens to question journalists and experts. Access to original data.
- Institutional ethics: Articulate values, processes and mechanisms of transparency. Develop media literacy and science journalism literacy

3. Develop public coalitions for promotion of responsible, accountable public journalism!

Suggestions for Inquiry

Consider how “disclosure” rules relate to media disclosure?

- When and how should officials not only to tell individual but the public?
- Do current disclosure practices or laws assist public disclosure? E.g. Are whistleblower laws sufficient?