

"HEALTH COVERAGE IN THE QUALITY AND  
POPULAR PRESS IN THE U.K"

VIKKI ENTWISTLE AND MICHELINE HANCOCK-BEAULIEU

CITY UNIVERSITY, U.K

CONFERENCIA CPCT 21-24/5/91

# HEALTH COVERAGE IN THE QUALITY AND POPULAR PRESS IN THE U.K.

Vikki Entwistle and Micheline Hancock-Beaulieu  
City University, U.K.

## 1. Introduction

The introduction of health sections in U.K. newspapers in recent years would appear to be giving a greater prominence to health-related subjects. This development removes some of the constraints of strict event reporting and potentially could allow for more in-depth treatment of the subject.

Karpf (1) described four paradigms of media treatment of health and medicine: the medical authoritative approach, the consumer/patient viewpoint, the preventive health look-after-yourself perspective and the social approach to illness. The impact of the messages conveyed can range "from subtle influences on people's understanding and knowledge concerning particular health issues to more direct influence on health-related behaviour" (2). It is now generally accepted that the press only rarely influences behaviour directly, but sets the agenda for public awareness and debate.

## 2. Content analysis

A content analysis of eight national daily newspapers was carried out over a period of two months in mid-1990, to obtain an overview of press health coverage in terms of topics, subject treatment, and the quality of information provision. The sample included four 'quality' titles (Guardian, Independent, Daily Telegraph and Times) and four 'popular' titles, (Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror and Sun).

For each of the articles which appeared over the period, the following data was recorded: 1. Subject category, 2. Budd score for newsplay, 3. Accompanying pictures, 4. Writing style, 5. Use of case histories, 6. Event orientation, 7. Sections of newspapers, 8. Authorship, 9. Sources cited, 10. Persons quoted, 11. People discussed, 12. Help offered.

## 3. Subject categories

A total of 1870 articles were found in the quality press and 1089 in the popular press. Each article was coded for as many main subject categories as appropriate, creating a total of 4123 entries. Of the twelve subject categories, based on previous work (3), the most common was Diseases (1293) followed by the National Health Service (544) and Preventive medicine (467). Research and medical advances account for only 271 entries whereas class inequalities in health was the least common category, represented by only 18 articles. Other subject categories included: obstetrics, environmental influences, birth control, addictions, medical competence, death, and disabilities. Topics which didn't fit into a specific category were grouped together.

### **3.1 Diseases**

A high proportion of articles on diseases were based solely on case histories and in the popular press these often involved celebrities. 39% of the articles mentioned a cause or means of transmission, and symptoms were given in 25%. Treatments were often described as somewhat or sometimes successful or were mentioned without indicating any evaluation. 9% discussed new or experimental treatments. A prognosis was suggested in 29% of articles and 22% mentioned that the disease was fatal. This was more common in the popular press. 21% of the articles provided some indication of incidence or prevalence. The quality press accounted for more information of this type and also for preventive measures which were given in 26% of articles. Practical help was specified in 15% of the cases.

### **3.2 National Health Service**

Articles about the N.H.S. were frequently event orientated providing information about patient care (40%), reforms (56%), and management issues (10%). Just over half were unfavourable towards the N.H.S., 38% were neutral and 11% favourable. Clinical care was more frequently projected in a favourable light than reforms. More articles on the N.H.S. appeared in the quality press and these were more concerned with the reforms.

### **3.3 Preventive medicine**

Articles in this category tended to be issue orientated. The event based ones were usually supported by adequate information. Significantly more practical help was offered with a strong emphasis on preventive or health promoting measures which the individual could adopt.

### **3.4 Medical research**

The quality press consistently included a greater proportion of articles in this category. Articles about new surgical techniques or pioneer operations were more frequent in the popular papers. They accounted for 15% overall of this category. Transplants provided abundant human interest particularly when the stories involved the search for donors.

### **3.5 Other subjects**

The quality and popular press adopted a distinct approach to a number of other subjects. In relation to health and diet, the former concentrated on food safety whereas the latter included more on nutritional values, slimming and exercise. Information on cause, treatment and incidence of various addictions was more likely to be included in the broadsheet newspapers. Alternative medicine was treated more favourably by the tabloids.

#### 4. Subject treatment

In addition to the choice of subjects for inclusion in newspapers, other patterns relating to the content, presentation and sources of information emerged across those subjects.

##### 4.1 Information content

58% of articles were based on an event but included little information. A further 33% event-based studies were considered to have adequate information. By contrast only 9% were issue orientated articles with discussion not stemming from an obvious event. There were significant differences between the quality and popular press. The tabloids all contained an above average proportion of event based articles with little information, whilst the rankings for event based articles providing adequate information were headed by the four quality papers.

The proportion of issue orientated articles included did not differ significantly between the quality and popular press, but the issues dealt with were different. Slimming and exercise for health appeared 27 and 23 times respectively in issue orientated articles in the popular press, but featured just 1 and 7 times in such articles in the quality press. The N.H.S., environment and health, and alternative medicine were topics more favoured by the quality papers.

References to case histories were made in more than half of the articles, and in almost a quarter of these the case provided the entire content. The quality press made greater use of general articles, or general articles illustrated with a case history while the popular press tended more to feature solely the case history. It has been argued that articles involving specific people could be more vivid and memorable than those written in general terms, although they may also be more likely to be sensationalised (4). This would seem to be the case in the Sun which had 59% of articles consisting solely of case histories and a rate of 40% sensationalized articles.

In keeping with the finding that proportionally more articles from the popular press consisted of or included case histories, a higher percentage (48% compared with 17%) of popular press articles involved a named person, often a celebrity. Overall women's health was discussed slightly more often than men's. Only 16 articles, (14 from the quality press) mentioned the health needs of disadvantaged groups such as the homeless.

Of the 25% of articles accompanied by pictures only 6% were considered to add useful or explanatory information to the health topic in question. Informative pictures were significantly more common in the quality press than in the tabloids, which contained over four times more non-informative pictures. In the case of the Sun the ratio was 11 to 1.

16% of articles gave some form of practical help. More than half of these provided direct advice. The rest supplied contact addresses, gave details of sources of further information or offered free supplementary literature. Proportionally more

articles from the popular press included practical help, in keeping with a consumer approach to health and medicine.

#### 4.2 Presentation

90% of all the articles were classed as being educational in style. Only 5% of the health articles in the quality papers were judged to be sensational in style as opposed to 12% in the popular papers. 40% and 31% of the articles in the Sun and the Daily Mirror respectively were considered to be sensationalized. Headlines, superlatives, the use of exclamation marks and bold typeface of certain keywords were some of the main indicators of articles with a more emotive tone.

Health-related articles appeared in various sections of the newspapers. Domestic news provided the most (48%), whereas special health sections covered 11%. Sections typical to the quality and popular press are different, for instance science sections are only found in the four quality papers. Parliament and politics sections accounted for 6% of the quality press health articles but just one article in the popular press. Most of the health material in the tabloids appeared in the leisure/living sections.

20% of the articles were attributed to medical and health correspondents. Science and environment correspondents wrote a further 4% and medical doctors were responsible for 4%. Other named authors accounted for 40%, news agencies 2% and the remaining 30% had no specified author. Doctors wrote more articles in the quality press, often in the form of letters to the editor. In The Sun and The Times the medical features sections were written by doctors.

#### 4.3 Sources

17% of articles acknowledged a published source, i.e. a journal, research report or book, and 13% were based on government or parliamentary sources. 6% reported on medical conferences or meetings of health service staff and 8% were based on interviews or visits conducted by the writer. The Lancet and British Medical Journal were the most commonly cited journals followed by Nature and the New England Journal of Medicine.

Doctors, health professionals or scientists were quoted in 30% of the articles. Politicians' views were aired in 13%, whereas patients were quoted only 9% of the time. Just over half of the articles quoting a patient or health subject were in the popular papers. Significantly more articles from the quality press quoted politicians.

### 5. The quality and popular press approaches to health

The study confirmed that there are clear differences in the coverage of health by the quality and popular papers. The quality press devoted more articles to health. The sources it cited and the medical and health professionals it quoted give the

impression that coverage is more likely to be sound and accurate. The greater account taken of research, and the political approach in relation to the NHS, further confirm the factual, objective and academic basis of the presentation and style. Overall a more authoritative medical paradigm prevails.

By contrast the approach adopted by the popular press was more consumer orientated. The focus was on case histories and prominence was given to the patient's viewpoint. A personal look-after-yourself perspective was promoted confirming that the responsibility for health matters rested with the individual.

## 6. Conclusions

In general, health related subjects seem to be selected much as other topics in newspapers. Events fitting the traditional criteria of newsworthiness dominate and only limited discussions about health issues are included. There is no lack of health related articles, but information to help people understand health matters and enable them to take appropriate action is lacking.

Regular health or medical features pages implicitly acknowledge the public interest in and the importance of health. Some in depth discussion, advice and practical help appear on these pages. However these make up a very small proportion of the entire output. Moreover readers of the quality press remain a minority of the reading public.

## REFERENCES

1. Karpf, A. Doctoring the media. London: Routledge, 1988.
2. Research Unit in Health Behaviour and Change. Changing the public health. Chichester: Wiley, 1989.
3. Kristiansen, C. M. and Harding, C.M. Mobilisation of health behaviour by the press in Britain. Journalism Quarterley, 61, 1984. 364-370.
4. Research Unit in Health and Behavioural Change. op.cit.