88. Media coverage of organ transplantation: towards a contextualized model of communication? The case of the Swiss French-speaking press

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Introduction

In many countries including Switzerland, the mass media and the print press in particular constitute the most significant source of information on organ transplantation for the public (Morgan et al. 2007; Schulz 2008). In a context of acute organ shortage, how the mass media cover organ donation and transplantation is of major importance. Science coverage in the mass media has been largely debated. The concept of “medialization” points out that mass media communication has shifted from a science-dominated model to a contextualized model of scientific communication (Gerhards and Schäfer 2009). Following Schäfer (2009), medialization is characterized by three main dimensions: 1) “Extensiveness” states that media coverage of science has increased over time, in quantitative terms; 2) The “controversy” dimension argues that media coverage of science has become more controversial, insofar as authority of experts discourses is no longer taken for granted, but questioned, or even challenged by journalists who do not act merely as transmitters of science to the audience, but hold an active and critical stance; 3) “Pluralization” means that media reports reflect various perspectives in society, in particular that “actors other than scientists have started to appear in the media when it comes to science matters” (Schäfer 2009: 478).

The aim of the present contribution is to examine to what extent coverage of organ donation and transplantation can be said to be in line with the medialization trend. We assume that media coverage follows a contextualized model of communication since organ transplantation is highly charged with emotions, and raises strong moral, societal and ethical stakes (Sharp 2006). Moreover, it can be claimed that media information about such a sensitive topic should foster public debate and help citizens to form their own opinions by conveying balanced arguments and various perspectives (Nisbet and Goidel 2007).

The study

This study draws on a quantitative content analysis applied to a corpus of 376 articles dealing with issues of organ donation and human transplantation (Hammer 2012). These articles are taken from the Swiss French-speaking general press, including three daily papers and two weekly magazines, covering a period of ten years (1998-2007). Before examining successively dimensions of extensiveness, controversy and pluralization, findings of a thematic analysis are presented.

1 Twenty-eight articles (8%) could not be classified under one of the four main scenic domains.
Through a thematic analysis, four “scenic domains” were distinguished, referring to the main framing orientation of each article of the corpus (Charaudeau 2008). The first scenic domain, called “scandals and affairs”, focussed on events that carried a negative connotation and that were likely to arouse public indignation, such as black markets for human organs or cases of medical errors (n=60; 16%). The “medicine and science” scenic domain included articles covering technical and scientific discoveries, as well as medical breakthroughs regarding transplant procedures and surgical innovations (n=65; 17%). As to the “politics” scenic domain, it addressed transplantation at the legal and political level. These articles mainly covered discussions about organ donation regulation in the context of the implementation of the Swiss federal law on transplantation, which entered into force in 2007 (n=95; 25%). Finally, the “public awareness” scenic domain, the most quantitatively important one (n=128; 34%), included articles aiming at increasing readers’ level of knowledge. They chiefly addressed organ shortage, the organization of transplant medicine in Switzerland, and how a transplant is concretely performed. At the same time, these articles supported donation of one’s organs and attempted to raise awareness of the public about organ donation as a social problem1.

Extensiveness

Looking at the number of articles over time, media coverage of organ donation and transplantation did not increase between 1998 and 2007. Figure 1 shows that there is no linear trend, neither upward nor downward. Instead, media coverage was characterized by peaks and troughs, and this irregularity applied to each scenic domain. More than nine articles out of ten were identified as being directly motivated by a particular event. This proves that media coverage of organ transplantation is closely tied to scientific and political developments, and other news.

Figure 1: Number of articles on organ transplantation by semester (1998-2007)
Controversy

Regarding to what extent content of media coverage was marked by controversies, we examined all statements in favour of organ transplantation, as well as critical statements, by focusing on the “public awareness” scenic domain. Statements of legitimation were found to be present in 95 articles (74%) out of the 128 articles of this subcorpus. These statements pertained to four main kinds of arguments: 1) The medical legitimacy (61%) highlighted efficacy of transplantation on patients, by emphasizing organ donation as a saving life procedure or as a procedure that significantly enhances quality of life; 2) The technical legitimacy (30%) valued transplantation as a surgical and scientific procedure; 3) The moral legitimacy (30%) valued organ donation as a praiseworthy gesture, emphasizing human qualities such as courage, altruism or solidarity; 4) Finally, the economic legitimacy (8%) referred exclusively to the fact that a kidney transplant is much less expensive than dialysis.

Compared to the 95 articles containing at least one positive statement, only 25 articles (20%) contained one or several statements giving a less positive or less consensual picture about organ donation and transplantation. Interestingly, these challenging statements mostly referred to specific controversial issues such as ethical concerns about living donation and face or hand transplant. As a result, the amount of statements valuing organ donation was much higher than critical statements.

Pluralization

Who did journalists refer to when writing about organ transplantation? In order to assess pluralization of actors, we counted a total of 1,622 statements in direct and indirect discourse pertaining to a series of 12 actor groups. Several noteworthy comments can be made when examining the distribution of the number of statements (Figure 2). As might be expected, the strongest actor group was healthcare providers, which included mainly transplant surgeons (31%). More surprisingly, patients (i.e. transplant patients, patients on waiting list or living donors) ranked second with almost a quarter of all statements. No more than 3% of statements came from specialists in social and human sciences at large (social scientists, ethics and legal experts). Finally, the general public was almost inexistent, with only 11 statements distributed in 4 articles (0.7%) (not shown in the Figure 2).
Space for words on organ transplantation was therefore not pluralized, since three actor groups (healthcare providers, patients and policy actors) accounted for three-quarters of all 1,622 statements. Moreover, it must be stressed that physicians’ discourses and patients’ emotional stories (including patients’ relatives and patients’ associations) moved in the same direction: they all supported organ donation without almost any criticism (Amey and Hammer, 2010). In addition, actor groups carrying potential discordant discourses or debating points of view, such as social scientists and ordinary citizens, were almost absent.

Conclusion

Over the decade considered, the print media coverage of organ transplantation does not fit in with the trend of medialization, since it was not extensive, was little controversial in its evaluations and only partially pluralistic in its actors. As a result, the media representation was characterized by a positive portrayal of transplantation, dominated by medical and moral frames supporting organ donation. Our analysis therefore shows that media coverage of organ transplantation does not follow a contextualized model of communication. In other words, media content cannot be considered as encouraging public debate and as reflecting various perspectives on the topic. In particular, one can argue that print press does not help citizens to form their own opinions based on a variety of points of views. However, further research should investigate to what extent and how media content shape people’s attitudes towards organ donation.

References


