

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HEPATITIS B REPORTING BY CHINESE AND US MEDIA

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Abstract

Health communication encompasses the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health. Mass media have great power to affect the public agenda and are quite necessary elements of efforts to improve personal and public health.

However, in the highly commercialized media environment, press likes nothing but a man-bites-dog story, which by definition is "news." What takes place everyday is not good news, reversely, what happened infrequently or even never existed is good news, which can catch eyeball and can stimulate the newspaper circulation or improve television/radio audience rating. The public health events are too common to arrest the eye of the journalists and editors.

Actually, in China, about 120 million people are Hepatitis B virus carriers, and about 30 million people have been infected by Hepatitis B virus. However, such a great many people are ignored by mass media. Compared with the great amount of reporting on SARS subject, the amount of reporting on Hepatitis B is so little.

Hepatitis B as a disease with its carriers could exert a long-term and extensive impact on the society. And also because of its long-term and extensive impact, the disease doesn't have any element to make a man-bites-dog story.

The paper has built a Hepatitis B reporting database, the articles were selected from mainstream newspapers in China and America, from 2000 to 2004. Through analyzing articles by using key words, scientific words, news sources, content, story frame, editions they belong to, we want to reach the conclusion that how media comprehend the disease, what kind of strategies the press use to communicate the important information of public health.

Keywords: Health communication, Hepatitis B

1. Significance of the Research

In a society where the media is highly commercialized, a man bites a dog is news but a dog bites a man is not news; Abnormal is news, on the contrary, normal is not news. What happens in our everyday life is not news, while what seldom happens or even never happens in our life is news. What preferred by the media, such as the TV, radio, newspaper, journal, internet and SMS, are murders, arsons, hijacks, rapes, sexual scandals and terror-attacks. However, how often can these happen to us or to our relatives, friends and colleagues? How many of us will be attacked or threatened by terrorists? In fact, what threaten our real life are unemployment, pollution, inadequate housing, disease, poverty, corruption and etc. In China, about 120 million people are Hepatitis B virus carriers and about 30 million people have been infected by the disease. These people will certainly have a long-term and wide impact to the development of society and economy. However, just because its impact is long-term and wide, it will never be regarded as front-page news by media. (However, it may never be regarded as front-page news by the media simply because it has a long-term and wide impact on the society.)

This paper explores the journalists' understanding on scientific terms, progress, meanings and sequent, and the popularity, depth, and wideness media is using these scientific terms. (This paper examines the journalists' understanding of scientific terms or jargons and their perception of the significance and results of the advance of

science. It also checks how and to what extent the terms are used by the media, the media’s understanding of science and technology and its approach to science reporting.) This paper suggests that media should report important theme that is close to the daily life of the people, in a simple language, in a bid. provide the public with vital information that they can use in their daily life.

2. Research Approach

Key Chinese media sampled by this paper are: the People’s Daily, Southern Weekend, China Youth Daily, Beijing Youth Daily, Liberation Daily, while the , English media sampled are: The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today.

The audit indexes for each news story include its title, page location, date of reporting, key words, scientific terms, self-made terms (such as “AIDS-orphan”), sources (government, specialist/scholar, NGO, doctor, sufferer/sufferer’s relatives, non-specific or other sources), as well as whether it is accompanied by a picture, the type of the story (1. hard news, 2. public notice from the government, 3. commentary, 4. feature, 5. popular science reading, 6. exclusive interview). Based on the information above, both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to get an objective conclusion.

3. Report on Hepatitis B by Chinese Media

Searching the People’s Daily with keyword has “Hepatitis B (HB)” turned out 124 relevant news stories and other articles from Jan 1st of 2000 to Dec 31st of 2004. At the same time, Beijing Youth Daily has 43 pieces, China Youth Daily has 31 pieces, Liberation Daily has 22 pieces and Southern Weekend has 25 pieces.

3.1 Theme of the Report

The themes of reports in these media include:

- The law case of Zhou Yichao’s murder, Zhang Xianzhu’s lawsuit
- Progress of science and research
- Popular science readings (introduction to drugs, tips on prevention, common knowledge on how to cure)
- Reveal of medical cheating and misleading ads
- Soft Advertising (Ads in the guise of news stories)

However, the focuses of the report in every media are not the same, as what is showed in the below graphs.

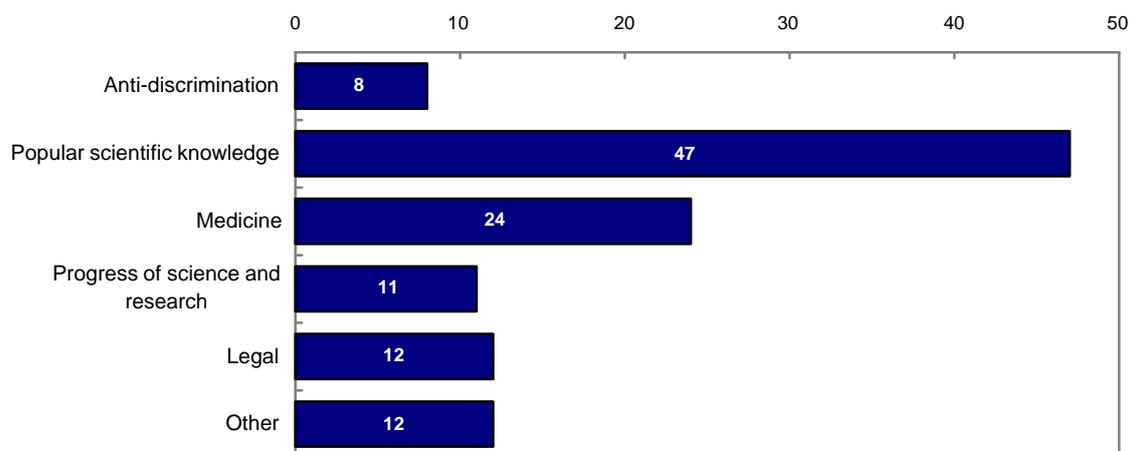


Figure 1. Distribution of report themes in People Daily

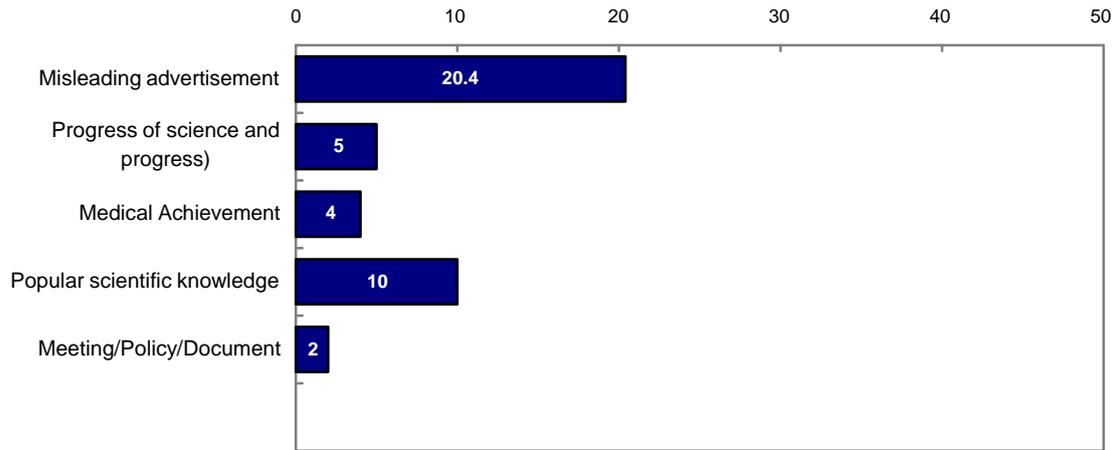


Figure 2. Distribution of report themes in Liberation Daily

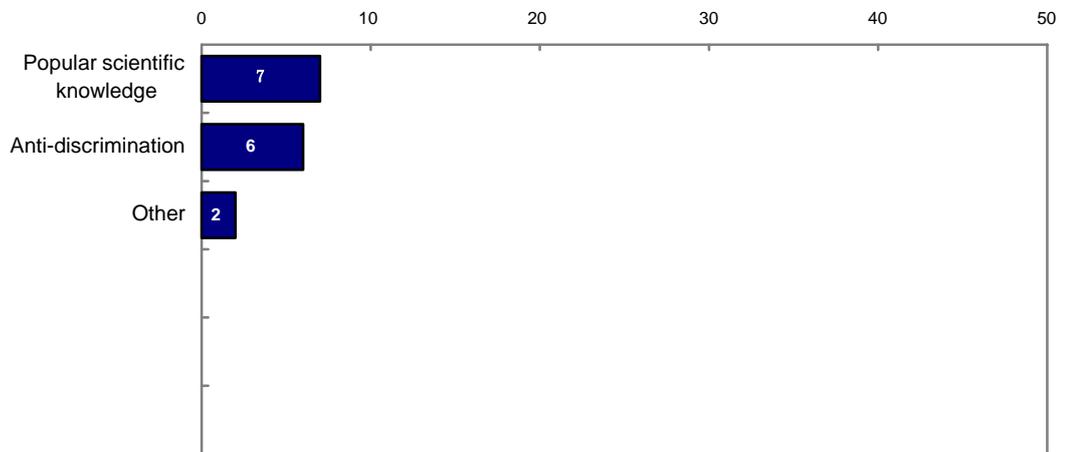


Figure 3. Distribution of report themes in Beijing Youth Daily

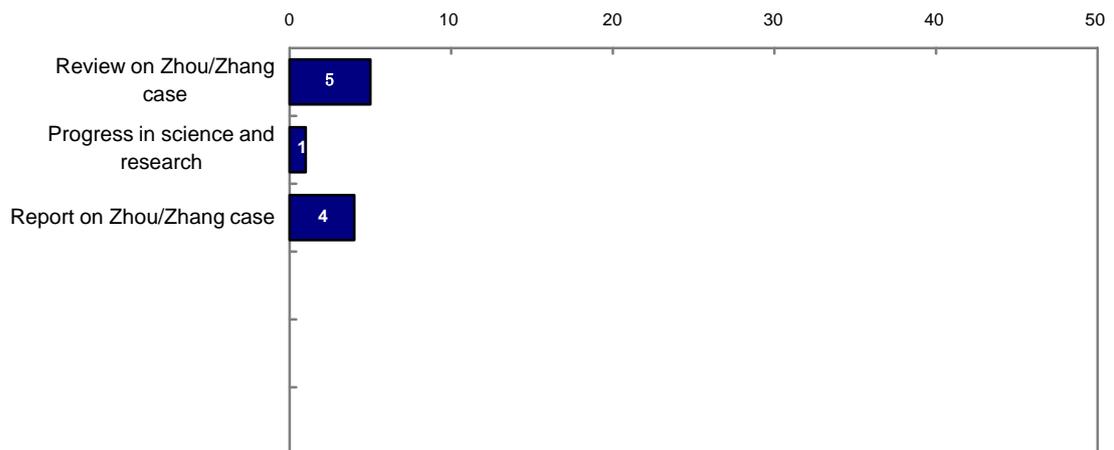


Figure 4. Distribution of report themes in China Youth Daily

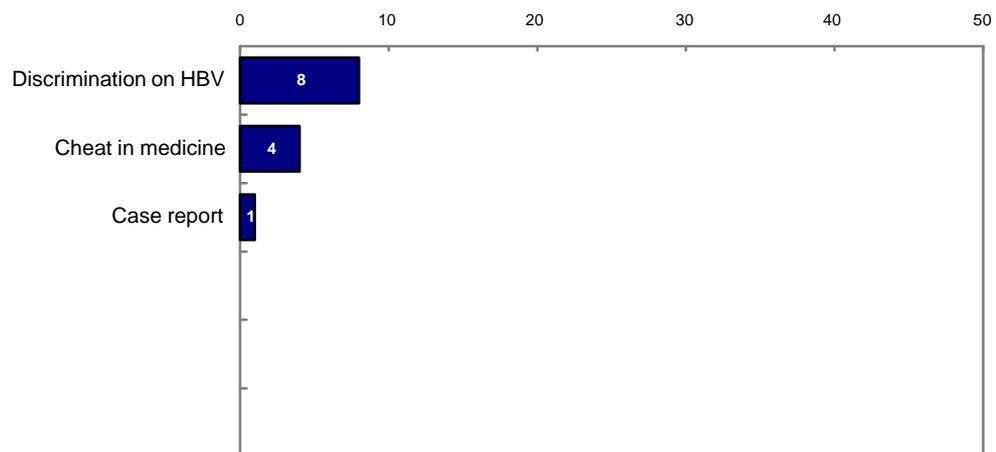


Figure 5. Distribution of report themes in Southern Weekend

3.2 Types of Literature, Information Source, Application of Scientific Terms and Self-made Terms

The types of literature of these five media are mainly: news, comment, feature, popular scientific knowledge and exclusive interview. These reports belong to social news, topical political news, science and technology news (popular scientific knowledge, progress of science and research and medicine) and legal news.

In these Chinese media, a scientific term will be usually followed with a detail explanation in the reports relevant with Hepatitis B. For example, “According to the medicinal definition, if the first, third and fifth items are positive, it could be called ‘big-three-positive’ for which the virus can copy themselves rapidly and its infectivity is formidable. If the first, fourth and fifth items are positive, it is ‘small-three-positive’ for which the virus copy themselves relatively slowly and the infectivity is relatively weak. Our reporter interviewed relevant specialist about the examination result and got to know that if the first, fifth or both fourth and fifth items are positive, it indicates that this person had been infected with HBV or he is recovering in process. However, his infectivity is nearly zero, and he shall be treated as a healthy person in social life.”

However, when we explore the news source, we could find that:

3.2.1 Some Important Data and Conclusive Words Fails to Give the Information Source, It Looks As If It Is the Subjective Guess of the Reporter

For example, among the 1.3 billion Chinese people, there are 0.1 billion HBV carriers, like Zhang Jie, who have no symptoms at all. They will be haunted throughout their life by the fact that they are HBV carriers, who may encounter discrimination in employment and everyday life. (Beijing Youth Daily: “Government Sued in First Hepatitis B Bias Case law professor to represent top scorer in civil servant recruitment test against Wuhu government Personnel Bureau for free”)

For another example, according to statistics, among the 10 million chronic HBV patients in China, about 8.5 million are chronic Hepatitis B sufferers. Every year, among the 300,000 people die from liver-diseases, about 50% percent die from hepatocirrhosis or liver cancer resulted from Hepatitis B or Hepatitis C. Particularly, pregnant woman carrying hepatitis virus (namely, HBsAg is positive), about 30% of them contaminate their babies with the virus in perinatal period. -----“Don’t forget to have your baby hepatitis B virus vaccine” “Beijing Youth Daily”

These reports cite some data which are valuable for readers to deduce the whole situation and incidence rate of the Hepatitis B, however, it is a pity that the authors fail to give reliable source of the data. In fact, missing of source is not proper in scientific news.

3.2.2 Net Citizen Are Being Paid More Attention To

For example, many reports quote net citizens such as chatroom host of “Gan Dan Xiang Zhao”.

3.2.3 A large proportion of report fails to give specific information source

For example, “it is known,” “it is reported,” “it is estimated by a specialist” and etc are used frequently in these reports.

Self-made terms are common in the reports of Chinese media these years, for example, “Hepatitis B villages”, “Hepatitis B sequelae”, “2003: year of anti-discrimination”, “first case of China in anti-discrimination against Hepatitis B” etc. These terms are the concise expression of social fact, but some terms such as “Hepatitis B village”, “Hepatitis B sequelae” will distract the readers’ eyes from disease itself to social problems, so that Hepatitis B will not only be regarded as a disease but also a social problem.

3.3 Period and Number of the Reports

3.3.1 Regular Reports, Not Evenly Distributed, Mainly Are Popular Science Knowledge.

3.3.2 The Number of Reports on Hepatitis B Increase Sharply Which Mainly Focus on the Case of Zhang and Zhou¹

f Zhou Yichao murders: April, 2003

f Zhou Yichao executed: Sep. 2003

f Zhang Xianzhu prosecutes 2003

f Final judgement of Zhang Xianzhu’s case: Dec 2003

f 2003: year of anti-discrimination against Hepatitis B.

To sum up, due to their differences in reporting approaches, publication periods and audience targeting, the five media mentioned above treat Hepatitis B reports different.

Table 1

Newspaper	Type	Type of literature	Angle of reporting	Content	
People’s Daily	Party organ deliver main stream voice	Diversified	All pay much attention to the key and hot issues, such as “Zhou, Zhang case”.	Diversified	Manner of reporting: 1) focus on scientific knowledge; 2) focus on explaining some phenomena; 3) focus on scientific
Beijing Youth Daily	Commercialized metro city newspaper	Mainly news and popular science knowledge		Popular science Topical politics Advertising reporting	
China Youth Daily	Party organ	Mainly review		Mainly topical politics	

Southern Weekend	Non-main stream weekly journal	Features and long report		Mainly social news, no popular science nor scientific research report	problem of human society.
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4. Report on Hepatitis B of Foreign Media

This paper audits three foreign media: The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today. Using “Hepatitis B” as the key word, we could find 128, 30 and 39 pieces of article respectively. Take The Wall Street Journal as an example, the report themes distribute as follow: progress of medical R&D, public health security, medical insurance mechanism and policy/law. The types of literature of them are all news and feature, without any review at all. 85% of the reports give specific source.

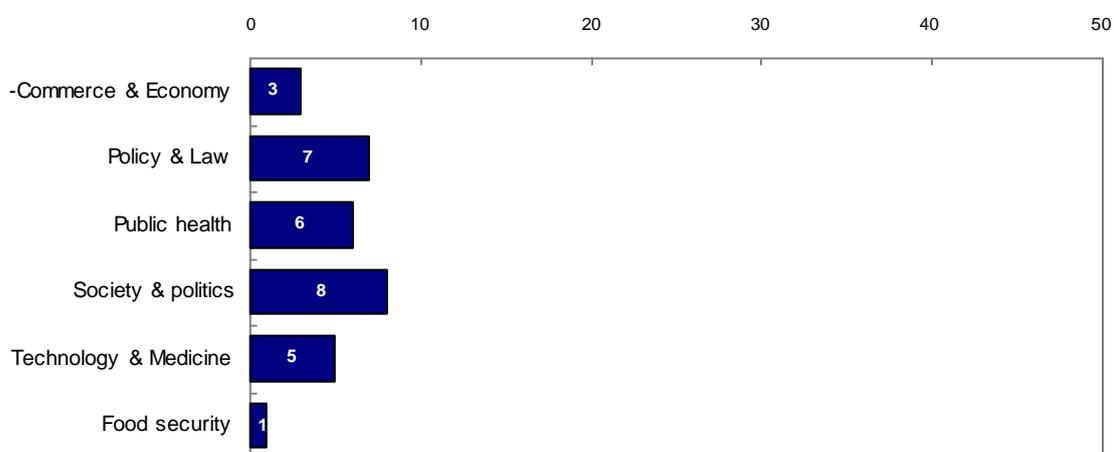


Figure 6.

Characteristics of their reports:

- 1). Most reports focus on the law and policy on medical condition and medicine information, few on discrimination against Hepatitis B. For example, when a new medicine is developed, the report will focus on its qualification and how much its side-effect will be, whether it is permitted by law. Besides, there are many tracking report in The Wall Street Journal about the side-effect of some medicine and medical accident. The report on policy and law are quite detailed, quite a few professionals and specialists will be interviewed and cited to give readers rich information for reference.
- 2). Many reports are about the system of medical insurance of the USA government. For example, whether and at what degree Hepatitis B carriers can benefit from the system, and the special policy aiming at different diseases.
- 3). Quite a few of the reports are about the R&D, acquiring and merging of medicine companies.
- 4). Information on medical security and insurance which are closely related with public’s real life are detailed and timely.

4. Conclusion

- 1). Chinese media are inclined to ignore regular report on Hepatitis B unless some accident happens. Even there are a few regular report, they solely focus on the introduction to Hepatitis B characteristics, manner of infection and method of treatment. However, foreign media’s regular report put Hepatitis B into a macro background of national public health. The themes of these reports cover many aspects including: medicine insurance, personal and institutional

donor to support medicine development etc. The material and angle of view show their concern on public health and public rights and interests.

2). Common logic in the Chinese media's reports on Hepatitis B accident is:

Hepatitis B—social issue—media hot report—social problem

For example, media interposes at the time when Zhou Yichao thrust with the fruit knife, so that Hepatitis B and Hepatitis B carriers intrude into public's eye suddenly. Thus a disease is rapidly "problematicalized" as a social problem. Thus, "anti-discrimination against Hepatitis B" becomes a central theme for the public.

When we regard Hepatitis B as "social disease", the leading force to resolve it has converted from hospital to media, from medical arena to public arena. Media should balance news among society, topical politics and legal news when reporting Hepatitis B. Following aspects should be emphasized particularly in the reports from now on.

1). Reveal the side-effect of the discrimination against Hepatitis B, and try to build a tempered environment for public opinion.

Discrimination against Hepatitis B increase Hepatitis B carriers' cost of social living. Discrimination will also increase the cost of social interaction. The tensional public opinion will increase the terror and wariness which are preventing people from normal social interaction. Thus, it is necessary for media to report and review from every angle of view in order to decrease discrimination against Hepatitis B, and try to build a good social environment for Hepatitis B carriers. Media should also concern the living condition and quality of Hepatitis B carriers. They are no more dangerous than a normal person except they need more time to relax to avoid over-tiredness. As almost all specialists have mentioned, they are qualified for all regular job except for infant teacher, food manufacture and sales, dietetic service etc. Of course, they are also qualified to be a student.

2). Technologically communication on Hepatitis B should be more comprehensively. Following main aspects should be included:

- Hepatitis B is a complicated, refractory, recessive disease. Its prevention and cure is un-ignorable.
- The main channel of infection
- The feasibility to cure Hepatitis B
- Countryside and village should be the key area to immune Hepatitis B
- The role of professionals in professional hospital & institution should lead in the process of curing the Hepatitis B
- Patients' cooperation is also a key element to cure Hepatitis B
- Counterfeit medicine, misleading advertisement can harm patients' health directly, which should be paid high attention to by the whole society.

3). Appeal to government to concern and make proper policy: for example, although government has put this disease in the immunity list, different from variola, cholera, poliomyelitis etc, Hepatitis B bacterin is not yet forced inoculated. In metro cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, almost 100% of newborn has been inoculated with Hepatitis B bacterin, however, the situation in county-town level area are quite bad. According to a survey, only 1/3 of all newborn has been inoculated with Hepatitis B bacterin all over China. For another example, provinces making separate health-check criterions for Hepatitis B in civil servant recruitment, is also noticeable.

[1] Li Xiguang, Zhou Min, *HIV/AIDS Media Book*, Tsinghua University press, 2005.1.

[2] Li Xiguang, *Deformed press*, Fudan University press 2003.9 .