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The Role Of Media In The Implementation Of Health Policies

By

Basharat Jazbi
The significance of media in the promotion of health policies cannot be over-emphasised. However, according to several scholarly studies and research, at times, media are blamed for social ills that prevail in a society. In the advanced industrial states, invariably violence is attributed to media, particularly its T.V. component. However, it is not the negative aspects but the positive contributions that the media has made in improving the environment of human relationships that needs to be understood and appreciated. Particularly in the health sector, the partnership between media and the health policy makers need to be strengthened and improved. In general, unrealistic expectations from media have led to misunderstandings about their usefulness. Neither mass media nor inter-personal communications alone can have the desired effect. They have different functions to perform which mutually enhance each other’s effectiveness.

Broadly speaking, in the context of health policy makers, one can identify the following functions of media:

1. to motivate policy makers
2. to inform decision makers and educate the masses about the latest technical developments in the field of medicine.
3. to raise general health consciousness and clarify options by strengthening the political will of the decision makers.
4. to foster and strengthen community involvement by encouraging dialogue and facilitating feed-back from the community.
If properly used, the media can prepare the ground for issues regarding health education. It must be understood that the role of media is markedly different between the western and third world countries. In the developed nations, due to higher literacy rate and relatively higher level of socioeconomic development, the television and newspapers are an integral part of day-to-day life and have acquired special significance. Print media and the television have a deep impact on the public mind. In the western world, through television and newspapers, health awareness is effectively promoted. In fact, television has revolutionized every facet of life, in particular, the world of sport. It has become an important vehicle for health issues and is a good bridge between the policy makers and the public. However, for some reason, it has not had the same impact which it does in the world of sports.

Unfortunately, in the third world where the illiteracy rates continue to be high, despite efforts by the governments to improve literacy levels, the impact of newspapers remains limited. Particularly in the health sector, their input is not fully utilized. However, efforts can be made to improve this imbalance. Television has emerged as an important medium of communication and has had deep impact on the lifestyles of viewers throughout the world. However, since it remains a luxury item in most of the third world countries, its limited impact is obvious. Television's relatively high cost has considerably restricted its impact, although potentially television remains an important investment of mass communication.

The way the role of media is different in the western and the third world countries, in a similar fashion the nature of diseases and health issues that confront the developed and the developing countries is also different. For example, cardiovascular diseases and cancer are more prevalent in the advanced, industrial states, although humanity does benefit from research and
advancement in these areas; but in the developing countries, the nature of health issues is different and needs not only more research but efforts need to be made to improve the level of public awareness on health issues.

In my judgement, the transistor radio has revolutionized the rural life in most of the third world countries. It is inexpensive, effective, and probably has the greatest effect on society; whereas in the western world, the use and effectiveness of radio is mostly limited to pop music and pop culture. In the developing countries, it can be used as an effective medium to raise public awareness about health issues. Whereas the role of newspapers and television in educating the public on health issues cannot be over-emphasized, the efforts should be to maximize the advantages that can be derived from radio as a vehicle for educating the masses.

The Ministry of Health and nongovernmental organizations like Red Crescent, etc., can coordinate and plan public health programmes that can be broadcast through the radio. In most of the third world countries, since radio broadcasting is controlled by the governments, the health ministry can plan an effective role in assuming leadership in educating the masses on health issues.

Let me briefly draw from my personal experience on the role and relationship between the Ministry of Health and media in Pakistan. It gives me great pleasure to state that the health policies that were initiated under my direction could not have achieved the degree of success that they did without the cooperation and support of Pakistan media, and the constructive approach adopted by my colleagues in the media. A supportive, enlightened and responsible media is a great asset for any policy, but for health policies their role is simply crucial. It might sound unbelievable, but in my five
years experience at the highest decision making level, I do not recall a single instance where the media did not support any of the constructive programmes of public interest.

In 1979, the Government of Pakistan decided to launch a country-wide expanded programme of immunization:

1. According to this decision, the minimum annual coverage target for fully-immunized children for 1982 was set at 50%, and for 1983 at 60%. However, under the Accelerated Health Programme (AHP) for the 24-month period commencing from January 1983, the target for children 0-5 years was raised to almost 100% (15 million children) to cover the backlog of several years.

2. A target was set to immunize seven million pregnant women with two doses of TT.

3. To reduce the mortality and morbidity of the target diseases by 54% by 1983 and 90% by 1990.

The Planning Commission of Pakistan estimated that full implementation of AHP would reduce by 20% the morbidity of children under five years of age. The annual immunization target after the termination of AHP will be four million new-borns and four million pregnant women. This target was achieved with considerable success. The Federal Ministry of Health issued instructions to all provincial health departments to extend the TT coverage from pregnant women to all women of child-bearing age (15-45 years).
To achieve success and maximum desired results, a three-pronged attack was launched from three main sources: (1) **FIXED CENTRES** which were located in the existing facilities and covered an area of five kilometres radius. Such centres have doubled in number in the past two years; (2) **OUTREACH TEAMS** comprising 2-4 vaccinators using cycles and motorcycles. They served an area of 5-10 kilometres radius. There are about 1500 such teams carrying out immunization work; (3) finally, the **MOBILE TEAMS**. These comprise of four to six vaccinators who carry with them a supply of material for approximately one week. They cover the far flung and difficult to reach areas. There are about 100 such teams throughout the country.

In these efforts, the media played a constructive and supportive role that resulted in achieving the following:

- Within a two year period, with an effective policy and planning, high success was achieved which resulted in public awareness due to the positive role of the media.

- In the Punjab alone, 98% of the target was achieved. Within two years 8.6 million children were fully immunized.

- In Lahore a WHO regional training centre and another 12 ORT training centres have been established in the country. In the last two years over 15 million ORT packets have been produced in Pakistan or procured through other sources and distributed. To implement the programme over 1311 doctors 4500 paramedical staff have been trained.

Although Pakistan's campaign is a part of WHO's EPI programme that was launched in 1974, it was in 1983 that Pakistan carried out 1.5 million
immunizations against measles, the number one killer of children (Pakistan is now producing its own measles and polio vaccines); and 4.2 million immunizations against tuberculosis, which is still a considerable problem in the area.

According to WHO review and estimates, the EPI programme will save 170,000 infant lives annually as a result of stepped-up activity resulting from the Accelerated Health Programme with the aim of protecting all children against these diseases by 1990.

Taking note of the successful achievements of Pakistan's Ministry of Health, "WHO Press" quoting the WHO Weekly Epidemiological Record No:33 laudingly commented that "Pakistan demonstrated that coverage levels can climb rapidly when political and health leaders join in a concerted effort to achieve common goals."

These comments and statistics clearly reflect that the implementation of policy decisions can produce the desire results. Since these targets were achieved during my tenure, I can say without any hesitation that although the personal guidance and support of the President of Pakistan and the hard work and tireless efforts of my Professional colleagues were no doubt instrumentable in achieving these successful results, the members of media in Pakistan certainly played a very significant role and can rightly feel proud of their exemplary contribution in this gigantic and one-time considered to be impossible task. The level of awareness and the interest that the media created among the general public is nothing but absolutely astounding.

I, therefore, am a firm believer that the media can and does play a supportive role in promoting the implementation of health policies.
A partnership between media and health sectors is not only desirable but indispensable for the successful implementation of health policies in the developing countries. In a country like Pakistan where 75% of the population continues to live in the rural areas, and despite the efforts of the Government the literacy rate continues to be appallingly low - 14% among women and about 24% among men, the significant role that the media can play in promoting public awareness regarding health care programmes is universally recognized and accepted. However, one should not ignore but recognize that the scarcity of financial resources and the lack of professional expertise among the third world countries is alarming and needs to be improved.

There is a need to promote understanding, cooperation and improve the level of communication between the media and the Ministries of Health. An informed journalist is a great asset for the projection of any public policy.

Unfortunately the role of media has not been given adequate attention in the projection and implementation of health policies. I strongly believe that appropriate policies must be formulated to ensure a proper and balanced relationship between media professionals and health policy officials. I propose the following means:

(1) Encourage and organize seminars and meetings that would promote an exchange of views between health officials and the media professionals. For these activities, funding should come forth from UN agencies and not only rely on the media resources. Fellowships and grants should be considered by WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR, etc., for media professionals.

(2) Initiate measures that will foster closer cooperation between health ministries and media professionals.
(3) Focus on health programmes and issues that attract local communities, as exhibited in an exemplary manner in China, where they have done wonders not only because they had a strong infrastructure or a supportive media, but because it succeeded in mobilizing the masses and getting the community involvement in health-related programmes.

(4) Ensure free flow of information - both technical and otherwise from the health sector to media professionals.

(5) Finally, promote co-operation and understanding between media and health officials at two institutional levels:

(a) at the national level, the respective Ministries of health and public officials should regularize contacts with media professionals

(b) at the international level, UN Agencies at the highest level should encourage participation of media professionals through financial support and intellectual collaboration.

This is particularly important for the media professionals in the developing countries where not only issues of health and public awareness regarding health is low, but also where media professionals work and operate under financial and other infrastructural constraints. No matter however, well planned a health policy may be, without a well-informed and supportive media, the policy would have little or no impact on the masses. It is therefore, imperative that public health officials and concerned officers of other related Ministries should have a closer collaboration with the media and media in turn, I would strongly urge the media to be truly responsive to all genuine needs and support our programmes with full intellectual favor.

Let us co-operate and join hands in servicing mankind and promote public awareness on health issues.

THANK YOU