

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How do national and regional print media capture health news and information in India?

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ABSTRACT

Background: Mass media significantly contributes to the dissemination of scientific information, including health information on prevention, diagnosis, treatment, national programs, and government schemes. **Aims and objectives:** To identify the number of news articles related to health in 4 regional newspapers and to classify the news items in terms of type of disease/ health issue covered. **Methodology:** Four leading newspapers were reviewed to identify the health-related news, their importance in terms of location in the newspaper, and the type of health issue covered. These were further classified based on the level of evidence used. **Results:** We extracted 720 health-related articles; 411 in English and 309 in Kannada dailies. The English newspaper had maximum coverage on environment 95 (23.1%) and health advisories 60 (14.5%). The Kannada papers on the other hand were dominated by health advisories 65 (21%), followed by nutrition and fitness 48 (15.3%), and environment 40 (12.9%). After the articles were categorized according to their evidence, it was discovered that 92% of them were evidence-based, with 84% of those articles based on Grade-II evidence. **Conclusion:** Health news in newspapers varies, often focusing on environment and health advisories, and relies heavily on expert opinion rather than empirical data.

KEYWORDS

Newspapers; Health; Public Health; Health literacy; Grey literature

INTRODUCTION

Mass media plays a very vital role in the transfer and dissemination of scientific information and knowledge to the general population. The public has long relied on media for health information.(1) At times, they are the primary source of information not just for

the general public but also for health professionals, with an expectation that they provide accurate, unbiased and complete information.(2) Media plays a vital role in influencing health care utilization, health behaviour of the masses, and policymakers in decision making.(3) The Stanford study demonstrated the effectiveness of mass media

such as radio, television, and print in improving cardiovascular health of the community.(4) Since it is assumed that news media largely determine what the issues of public health importance are, it can be efficiently used by civil society organizations for attracting attention of policymakers towards important issues.(5,6) The general public often lacks the knowledge to evaluate the authenticity of news in media, which is their primary target audience.(7)

Print media is the most accessible source of health-related information for the general public, with reader perception largely influenced by news coverage and article placement within the newspaper. (8)

Aims and objectives

Among the four newspapers covering two languages (English and Kannada) in Dakshina Kannada

- To identify the number of news articles related to health published
- To classify the news items in terms of the type of diseases/health issue covered, location of article and the type of evidence base used in reporting

MATERIAL & METHODS

Study design: Cross sectional study

Study setting: Newspapers in two languages including English and Kannada published in Mangaluru, a coastal city in south India

Study duration: The print media was examined for a period of two weeks.

Sampling technique: Complete enumeration

Exclusion criteria: Health related or health product related advertisements, and articles related to veterinary health were not included

Data variables, sources of data and data collection

Mangaluru publishes 4 national (with a local publishing office) and 12 regional dailies. For two weeks, each day, two reviewers independently examined the hard copies of four prominent local newspapers, and articles pertaining to health were shortlisted. Complete enumeration of the articles during the study duration was done and a total of 720 articles were extracted. A third reviewer hand - searched the newspaper for any missed-out articles. Advertisements related to health or

health products and articles that were purely related to veterinary health were excluded.

The articles were further classified based on the health issues covered such as communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, mental health issues, environment, nutrition and fitness, disaster, health policy, newer research findings, health advisory and health related social problems. The location of the article in the newspaper namely the front page, last page, editorial page, supplement, and others was noted. Articles were also screened for supporting scientific evidence. All the articles that were evidence based were further graded; grade I if the evidence was from systematic review/meta-analysis or from empirical studies like randomized controlled trials original studies; grade II if the evidence to support was from an expert opinion. (3)

All the information analysed was those which were available and accessible from the public domain.

Ethical clearance: Since no personal/human information was collected during the process of this research, institutional ethics committee exemption was obtained prior to the beginning of the study. Letter No: IEC-1/225/2019.

Operational definitions

Health news article: Any article in the newspaper that reflects a health event or a health issue was classified as health news.

Evidence - based articles: The news articles with supporting evidence from or with the help of research papers, expert opinions, or original studies.

Non-evidence-based articles: Health news articles without any evidence, such as reports of health or disease events and campaigns/camps.

Statistical Analysis

Data collected were entered in Microsoft Excel and analysed using SPSS Version 23. Key analytic outputs are expressed in terms of numbers and proportions.

RESULTS

Of the four newspapers reviewed daily, a total of 720 (411 in English and 309 in Kannada newspapers) health - related articles were identified and reviewed (Table 1).

(Table 2) describes the types of articles extracted from the newspapers during the two weeks of the study period. The English newspaper had maximum coverage on environment 95 (23.1%) followed by health advisories 60 (14.5%), policy 55 (13.3%), and least number of articles on disaster 13 (3.1%). The Kannada papers on the other hand were dominated by health advisories 65 (21%), followed by nutrition and fitness 48 (15.3%), environment 40 (12.9%), and had the least number of articles on health research 2 (0.6%).

Location-wise, 9% of the health-related articles could find a place in the front page, 7% in editorial and supplements, and 75% on other pages (Table 3). (Figure 1) depicts the classification of articles based on evidence, where 92% of the articles were evidence based and among them 84% based on Grade-II evidence.

Table 1 Coverage of health news in four Indian newspapers during June-July 2019, Dakshina Kannada, India

Name of the news paper	Number of health news	Percentage
Deccan Herald	247	34.3
The Times of India	213	29.6
Udayavani	137	19
Vijaya Karnataka	123	17.1
Total	720	100

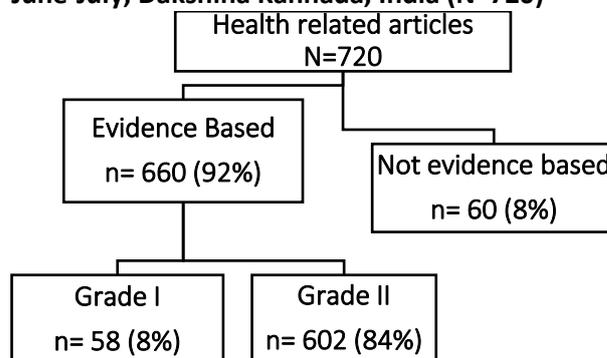
Table 2 Profile of the news articles published in selected newspapers during June-July 2019, Dakshina Kannada, India

Type of article	English (n=411) n (%)	Kannada (n=309) n (%)
Communicable diseases	40 (9.7)	33(10.7)
Non communicable diseases	23 (5.5)	38 (12.3)
Mental health	32 (7.7)	27 (8.7)
Disaster	13 (3.1)	5 (1.6)
Environment	95 (23.1)	40 (12.9)
Nutrition and fitness	36 (8.7)	48 (15.3)
Health policy	55 (13.3)	30 (9.7)
Research	22 (5.35)	2 (0.6)
Health advisory	60 (14.5)	65 (21.0)
Health related social problems	35 (8.46)	21 (6.8)

Table 3 Location within the newspaper of the health news in the selected newspapers during June-July 2019, Dakshina Kannada, India.

Location within the Newspaper	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Front page	63	9
Last page	12	2
Editorial	53	7
Supplement	50	7
Others	542	75
Total	720	100

Figure 1 Quality assessment of articles published in selected newspapers during June-July, Dakshina Kannada, India (N=720)



DISCUSSION

The present study highlights the importance given to health-related articles in print media which is an important mode of communication with the general public. This is one of the few studies from India which has looked at National as well as regional patterns of health-related news. The study found that English newspapers had more health-related articles compared to the regional language paper. World Environment Day is observed every year on the 5th of June and that could be the reason for more articles published on the environment in English newspapers. The regional newspapers had more advisories which could be related to the Dengue outbreak which occurred in the district. This indicates that regional dailies are aware of the pulse of community health in that area and issue relevant health advisories for community awareness. The lack of coverage of disasters was understandable as there was no natural disaster in those two weeks in the country. But the relatively scant reporting in the national

dailies on non-communicable diseases was conspicuous. On the other hand, the regional newspapers in addition to the articles on health advisories, had coverage on nutrition, fitness, communicable and non-communicable diseases. Newer health related research was notably scanty in both national and regional newspapers and it is a topic that the general public reads only in newspapers. This is similar to a study done on magazines in Australia.(9,10,11) This emphasizes a need to include more of such articles in the Indian print media.

Generally, the most important news in the newspaper is highlighted on the front page and editorials cover the views on different topics by the editor-in-chief of the newspaper or the subject experts. Though health related articles have a very important role in influencing the health behaviour of the community, it was observed that such articles were not covered in both of these sections. This finding was consistent other study from Mumbai. (8) This emphasizes that articles related to health along with the latest updates need to occupy the front pages of newspapers along with political and financial events which are presently occupying the majority of the space on the front page.

On assessing quality of the articles, it was found that 92% of the articles were evidence-based considering our operational definition. The articles reported were supporting its information from or with the help of research papers, expert opinions, or original studies implying that public is getting valid news when it comes to health issues. This is consistent with the studies done in various countries. (12) and in contrast to the study done in Lebanon.(3) Grade-II evidence was the source of information for the majority of the evidence-based articles. This finding is consistent with the study done by El-Jardali et al in Lebanon.(3) Although majority of the articles are evidence-based there is a need to emphasize more on publishing articles based on grade I evidence which would have a stronger scientific basis.

The strength of the study is that it was reviewed by two independent reviewers,

however since it was carried out over a period of two weeks it may not be representative. Further research is recommended to study the barriers and facilitators in evidence-based reportage in Indian newspapers and follow-up on important health news in print media. There should be good collaboration between public health professionals and media personnel for good quality health reporting.

CONCLUSION

The health news as reflected in the national and regional newspapers varies widely in terms of subjects covered. English dailies that cover more of national news had a greater number of health news as compared to the regional ones. Health news occupying the front page and the editorial page is relatively lower when compared to the other sections and the supplements of the newspapers. The content in these newspapers focused more on the environment, issues related to health, nutrition, fitness, and health advisories. Research dissemination was very less in the regional dailies. The articles that are evidence-based support their reporting either by empirical studies, or more often by an expert opinion.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends further research on the barriers and facilitators in evidence-based reportage in Indian newspapers and the follow-up of important health news in print media.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study was done only for a period of 2 weeks. Also, this study was done before COVID and the role of print media has drastically changed post pandemic

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

As print media is the main source of health information for the general public, this study sheds light on how well newspapers are fulfilling this function.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

All authors have contributed equally.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Nil

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors haven't used any generative AI/AI assisted technologies in the writing process.

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