Working with the media in pursuit of Health for All

Working with the media can be part of an effective strategy for influencing actors and debates in ways that can help to foster positive change – from awareness raising, visibility or recognition, to changes in attitudes and behaviours that lead to policy commitment and action. At the same time, it can be an unappealing and challenging proposition, with people often not knowing when, who and how to engage the media. This key message brief shares learning from Future Health Systems partners’ experiences of working with traditional, primarily mainstream, media outlets publishing in print and online, as well as some television and radio organisations over 12 years. We hope it offers some helpful reflections for those who are currently or considering working with the media.

Key messages

1. Work with the media to raise the profile of an issue; foster a culture of independent, truthful and high quality investigative reporting; or to reach out to communities with health education messages.

2. Engage with the media early and on an ongoing basis throughout, or even beyond, the life of a project to get the media invested in your research. In times of crisis, the media can have a critical role to play, and it is easier to work with them when relationships have already been established.

3. Build an effective and sustainable relationship with the media, which is mutually beneficial in nature and built on trust and credibility.

4. Develop a clear understanding of what the media are interested in. Human-interest stories, current issues and campaigns, where stories are set, and politics have the potential to grab journalists’ attention.

5. Navigating challenges around the ethics of reporting, poor journalism standards, and others, can be tricky, but there are ways to overcome these.
Introduction

Over the course of the last 12 years, Future Health Systems (FHS) partners have been working with the media to highlight research-based evidence and learning, draw the attention of key audiences, and shift debates and discourses concerning poor people’s access to safe and affordable health services. This Key Message Brief aims to share this learning by drawing on the experiences from three FHS partners: Indian Institute of Health Management and Research (IIHMR); Makerere University School of Public Health (MakSPH) in Uganda; and the Liberia Center for Outcomes Research in Mental Health (LiCORMH). This brief focuses on FHS’ experiences of working with the media.

Why work with the media?

Before engaging the media, having a coherent media strategy, informed by analysis of stakeholders, plus sufficient context specific resources to implement the strategy, is essential.

Work with the media to:

Raise the profile of an issue: The media offer a platform for disseminating research findings to a large audience, thereby raising the profile of the issue at hand, and focusing public attention on it.

- In India, FHS’s work over a number of years highlighting the critical health problems faced by the children of the Sundarbans received significant coverage in three wire services and over 30 print outlets (mainstream English and vernacular) across India. This led to greater awareness amongst policymakers, civil society and citizens, and in turn, facilitated FHS researchers’ efforts to engage with state and local officials.

Foster responsible and accurate reporting: Work with journalists to encourage more critical, in-depth, and high quality investigative writing on health issues. This is particularly important in places where people draw heavily on the mainstream media for health-related information.

- In Liberia, reporting on mental illness was widely influenced by hearsay and rumours, and stigma was closely associated with misconceived beliefs. Families of people with a mental illness did not believe it was curable, and turned to traditional healers or religious advisors. With no accurate knowledge on the topic, these individuals often treated their patients with extreme cruelty. LiCORMH and the Carter Center Mental Health Program have been leading efforts to foster a culture of independent and truthful reporting, by providing training to 75 journalists on mental health issues. As a direct result, the Mental Health Reporters Network (MHRN) was established, and later mobilised to engage and influence debates and stakeholders around the passage and subsequent enactment of Liberia’s first Mental Health Act of Parliament in 2017. Media engagement also led to changes in perceptions about common mental health and neurological disorders like epilepsy, with families now taking members with a mental illness to clinics, health centres and hospitals.

Reach target audiences as part of a health education intervention: The media can be an effective channel for sharing health education messages with specific audiences. In places where radios are still popular, they can be used, with great success, as health communication tools.

- MakSPH’s maternal, newborn and child health community awareness work in Eastern Uganda, included a number of activities led in collaboration with the media. These included monthly radio talk shows, daily radio spots on three different radio stations, media excursions, and roundtables with journalists, and covered topics ranging from birth preparedness to policy issues.

When to work with the media?

Continuous engagement with the media – from inception and throughout the life of a project – is more likely to facilitate uptake of research evidence and learning. Create and sustain interest among journalists in the research; and make them invested in the project. It is also easier to work with the media in times of crisis if there is already a history of working together when there are no emergencies. When health systems face shocks, working with the media immediately during and after a shock becomes crucial because of their role as critical information sources for the community.

- In Liberia, during the Ebola virus disease epidemic of 2013–2015, people relied on vital information given by the media for direction, update, and protection. The media helped turn the tide on rumours, misinformation, fear and distrust during Ebola. LiCORMH’s role in this process was critical: LiCORMH had been building the capacity of journalists on how to report responsibly for four years prior to the outbreak. Some of the journalists that LiCORMH trained as part of this partnership with the media went on to train health communications teams during the crisis.

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Knowing what the media are interested in

Human-interest stories that put people at the heart of events and issues are of particular interest to the media’s audiences. Having a news hook will give your research some visibility. Current issues and campaigns, where stories are set, and politics have the potential to grab journalists’ attention.

- In India, FHS evidence on open defecation directly linked to malnutrition, stunting and wasting was brought to the fore by the press as it was aligned with the benefits of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan – the Clean India Mission – a major sanitation campaign led by the Government of India, which had significant public interest.

- IIHMR have also found that the media they work with are interested in covering health stories about the Indian Sundarbans because of the region’s contrasting features. On the one hand, it is a UNESCO world heritage site, but on the other, the region is home to a population of close to five million, who are vulnerable to frequent climatic shocks and have to contend with poor health facilities, as well as child health indicators lower than the state average of West Bengal.

- According to LiCORMH, politics is by far the most widely covered topic by radio stations, print and online media in Liberia. Around 80% of the 20 radio outlets in Monrovia are government or private institutions established for business purposes or tied to political interests. Many of the administrative sub-divisions of the country have popular radio stations that either run their own political talk shows or relay from affiliate stations in Monrovia. Health is most often covered when it relates to politics, disasters or emergencies, or when it is paid programming.

How to develop a constructive relationship with the media

A constructive relationship with the media should be a mutual beneficial one, based on confidence, trust and credibility. Being responsive to media requests will influence the media’s perception of your organisation in a positive way. Nurturing media relationships over the long term, building the brand recognition and credibility of an institution or project, and having partnerships both at national or international level helps in building trust and credibility. Mutual trust comes from researchers and journalists respecting each other’s roles and expertise. For example, giving pointers to journalists on emerging issues but not telling them how to write the story.

- IIHMR regularly shares quotes from FHS researchers and data from a variety of sources including the National Family Health Survey, District Level Health Survey, or published journal articles when the media request evidence. The team also informs media partners of newsworthy FHS work on maternal, newborn and child health in Eastern Uganda featured in The New Vision (2014).
information as soon as it is out (e.g. changes in government regulations, new initiatives). This has led IIHMR to be considered as a credible source for expert knowledge.

What are the key challenges?

There are opportunities but also challenges to engaging with the media. These can be tricky, but it is worth the effort trying to learn how to navigate them.

In countries such as Liberia, where resources are limited within media institutions, and journalists are poorly remunerated, journalism standards can sometimes be low. Story choices are often dependent on financial compensation rather than being topic-driven. Forming non-transactional relationships with the media can be challenging. Journalists often have limited skills or knowledge about the ethics of reporting. It is in this context that LICORMH supports journalists and editors by providing them with training on how to report ethically and responsibly on mental health issues.

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Researchers are often asked to comment on politically sensitive issues. These may range from a government or political party directly blamed for poor performing health services, or humanitarian assistance perceived to favour politically aligned groups. It is important to deal with the media tactfully in this situation. Where IIHMR members do offer a comment, they ask the journalists to show them a copy of the quote or reference that they wish to publish to make sure it is not controversial or misquoted.

Conclusion

These experiences demonstrate how valuable it is for researchers to build an ongoing, constructive, and mutually beneficial relationship with the media as part of their policy influence and research uptake strategies. Media interventions have the potential to play a major role in influencing health policies and changing people’s attitudes and behaviours. It is therefore worth investing time and effort to better understand what the media are interested in and develop constructive relationships with them.

Key references


MANIFEST Study Team (2016) Improving maternal and newborn health outcomes in Kamuli, Kibuku and Pallisa Districts in Eastern Uganda, Kampala: Makerere University School of Public Health. Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5034f6266e4b09af678ebcd47/t/57836a7f03596e5098f1e78c/1468230275950/MANIFEST+Research+Brief.pdf

CREDITS

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