

# Role of Media in Improving Public Health

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**Abstract-** The influence of media in public health events is discussed. It is revealed that both media and public health are common in object and characteristic. The relationship between media and public health is briefly illuminated. Subsequently, the ways of media in improving public health is elucidated. In addition, some suggestions for the government, special organization and community are presented as well.

**Keywords-** Media; Public Health; Role; Relationship

## I. BACKGROUND

In 2011, Japan detected high levels of radiation in rice grown near the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plant. The radiation has also been found in local foods like shitake mushrooms, bamboo shoots, fish, beef, and so on [1]. Just imagine how terrible a health risk would be posed to those who eat these foods? Fortunately, the public were timely informed through media. The infectious diseases such as SARS and influenza H1N1 usually occur in certain areas, but may also become common diseases. In general, what means have been applied to control the epidemic depend on how much the related circumstance has been realized. Shanghai is the largest city in China, and it successfully fought against SARS in 2003. The local government learned from experiences of other places, and assumed early reporting and early treatment as effective measures [2]. It is the media that delivers the message rapidly, which enables the public to get ready for epidemic control. The power of media is also exhibited when great disasters such as earthquake occur. Those disasters often lead to environmental pollutions and epidemic. To deal with these issues related with public health, it is necessary to disseminate and exchange information via media.

## II. INTRODUCTION

The media imparts various messages to the public. The object that public health cares is also the public [3, 4]. As seen, they have something in common. There is a close relationship between them.

Griffiths and Knutson have discussed the role of mass media in public health. They elucidated that mass media have been employed to reach three effects, which are to learn the correct health information, to change the health attitudes and values, and to establish new health behaviours. However, it was also found that mass media had variational and often limited effects due to the selective and inadequate nature of communication [5]. Recently, the mass media including television and internet have been regarded as the major factor impacting on our values, beliefs and behaviours. The threats of the detrimental effects of media to public health are seriously evaluated [6-8], and the positive roles of media are also mentioned [7], [9-11].

Accordingly, the role of media in public health is controversial. Undoubtedly, it is expected that media can play more positive roles while exerting less negative ones via suitable design and practice. As we are in an age of information explosion, the questions such as "What is the relationship between media and public health?" and "How to make full use of media in improving public health?" are worthy of attention. Herein, some primary considerations are put forward to elucidate the role of media in improving public health.

## III. CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDIA

Media can be classified into traditional media including print, radio and television, and digital media which are based on the internet and the Web [12-14]. So far, both traditional and digital media have been applied to spread and storage information. Though the traditional media have disadvantages such as the limited capacity and poor interactivity, their reliable sources qualify them as information disseminating tool. Nowadays, more and more people prefer to search information online due to the advantages of the digital media.

The key characteristics of digital media include interactivity, customization of content, hypertextuality and multimodality [12]. The public are not just passive audiences. They are active information seeking individuals, so are the message producers and distributors. World Wide Web offers the users different options, various communicating ways and information about information as well. What is special is that one can access to a certain web site at any time. It is easy to obtain abundant information via the internet. Indeed, the rapidly spreading information flow maybe unchecked and the users online are multi-faced. Thus, the message sought may be intentionally or unintentionally inaccurate, biased or misleading [13]. In fact, the credibility of the message also relies on the sense of responsibility of reporters and editors. In view of these, the target audiences should be more conscious and better-educated.

The digital media spread information rapidly, widely, efficiently, comprehensively and actively. Evidently, it is more convenient than the traditional ones. In spite of this, the inherent features enable traditional media to be supplementary alternative to reach as more members of public as possible. For example, television is capable of utilizing satellite television technology to broadcast what is happening simultaneously. Newspaper, magazines and radio can disseminate news or information too. These make the information available for those who have no access to the internet.

The abundant media provide people with various choices. Whatever medium is adopted, the public is able to receive the information. The public characteristic of media is quite obvious.

#### IV. THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE MEDIA, PUBLIC AND PUBLIC HEALTH

As seen, the public, media and public health are closely linked. Nowadays, media are well developed. To a certain extent, what is reported on media can change the psychology and habit of the audiences. On the other hand, people spread useful information or something else via modern communication platforms. These deeply influence the quality of people's life and affect the development of public health as well.

Media provide the public with information. Meanwhile, the public generate and distribute message through media. The general public and health workers are target audiences. Besides, policy makers and media producers are the important audience members [15]. The benign interaction between media and the public as well as the functions of media such as broadcasting, reminding, communicating and recording are propitious to improve public health [16].

By using media, the government not only imparts latest information to large groups of people, but also is supervised by the public. The government and the public can communicate through media. Media provide objective and detailed information to help the government to make correct decisions as soon as possible, which enhances the development of public health.

Indeed, the effect of media on the public and public health is twofold, either positive or destructive. Since the general public are more and more scientific and conscientious, it is expected that the role of media is dominantly positive. Of course, both audiences and producers should apply media seriously and carefully. It is particularly essential for average people to judge the correctness of information before accepting it. In other words, one doesn't just rely on media. It is better for people to train their precaution consciousness and comprehensive ability now and then.

As the key characteristic of public health is the public, any action taken by the public will deeply affect public health. Moreover, any factor that may affect the public can impact public health. The action, discussion and event in one area can spread to other places through media and cause more effects. That is why we should not ignore the influence of media in public health.

#### V. WAYS OF MEDIA TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH

As mentioned above, both the media and public health are public-oriented and public-centred. Moreover, there are various media channels for disseminating health information to the general public from all walks of life quickly. Therefore, it is anticipated that media are able to play a positive role in improving public health.

The multiply forms of media provide available choices for all members of the public. For those who live in undeveloped regions where the technology is not advanced and transport is inconvenient, it is difficult for them to communicate with the outside world. As radio and television is more readily available in these regions, they can be used as effective health communication tools. People there can still get information about public health by listening to radio or watching television. For people who lack professional knowledge, tailor-made TV programs are easy to understand and have an obvious effect on helping people learn something with entertainment [11]. These are helpful to impart the related knowledge to the public and enhance their attention of their health and public health. The internet is an abundant source of information. More and more people have access to internet. It provides an individual way to seek, accept or distribute whatever about public health. In addition, books describe the details about public health and journals record the progress of this field. Health care workers and the general public all benefit from these. Health care workers can understand the interrelated information deeply or do further research and develop this subject. As for the general public, they may solve their occasional puzzles via traditional or digital media. The diversification of media enables people of different ages, culture background, interests and habits and so on to acquire the message to the most extent.

People's daily life is affected more or less by what is reported on the media [8], which impacts the public health to some extent. Public health covers every field of the society, not only dealing with food safety, drug safety, environmental health, disaster and epidemic events, but also concerning about the implementation of policies, programs and strategies. Actually, information on health events has been utilized in public health field for a long time [17]. Because most of the information probably changes people's life materially or mentally, the status of public health varies accordingly. There are only two possibilities for the consequence. The positive one is that the health care system is gradually improved and people become more and more conscious of health protection. The other is applying the media incorrectly in public health issues, which results in detrimental effects.

One way to have media fully play its positive role is to impart the latest public health events to the large groups of public and keep them updated. By doing so, the authorities can prevent the situation from becoming worse and minimize the possible harmful effects.

The instant reports on media helps the public know the cause and effect of the event and prepare themselves for taking precautions. The information including the cause, possible adverse effects, treatment and the progress of the event should be covered in detail and in time so that people get to know the event comprehensively and scientifically. In fact, a special column presented on media to analyze the event and offer some effective precaution measures is very helpful when crisis or disaster occur. By this way, unnecessary social panic can be avoided. To some extent, the media play such a role to render certain spiritual comfort and psychological counselling so that people can rationally treat the epidemic and the event can be smoothly handled.

There are other ways for media to play positive role in improving public health: media also contribute to supervising and urging the policy makers to take immediate and decisive measures. The general public can learn something useful about health care through media by such ways as browsing through materials about public health or communicating with others. Health care workers gather information and disseminate it via media, which in turn help them do research, find new thing, and consequently promote public health.

In a word, media and public health are closely related. When used properly, media might become a powerful tool for developing public health. Otherwise, it might exert a disaster effect. In view of this, it is of great significance that the authorities and health care workers realize comprehensively the effect of media on public health.

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