
The Role of the Media

Journalists Are Helping to Change Attitudes Toward Health and Promoting Health Literacy

BY DANIELA BUCUR

The media can “be an efficient resource for transmitting useful information about health to a large public,” said Carole Simpson of ABC News and board member of the International Women’s Media Foundation at the International Conference “Reporting on Women’s Healthcare” held in June 1999 in Constanta, Romania. The media are one of the powerful driving forces of modern society. They are not just a source of information for the general public, but also a potential vehicle for educating the public, a vital service especially when it comes to health issues. This article, which draws on examples from reproductive and women’s health campaigns in Romania, will look at ways the media can be used as a tool to educate a population.

Forging a Partnership

Health education can be defined as the promotion of health and the prevention of disease through a planned combination of activities developed for a target population. As such, the media offer great potential for educating the public about health issues. Daily health news featured on television or radio programs, weekly question and answer columns in magazines, or an investigative article in a newspaper, can change misconceptions the public has about health issues and can lead to a better understanding about realities facing the population and possible solutions.

In February 1997, Romanian journalists participated in a workshop about the importance of reproductive and women’s health. It was an historic moment for the country as it signaled the beginning of one of the most important partnerships in public health: between the mass media and the health specialists. The workshop was useful for establishing links between journalists and professionals who are the primary resources necessary for writing good and responsible articles. At this workshop, the role of the media changed as journalists—who in the past often just watched and reported what they saw—were invited to become active stakeholders of a public health partnership. Involving journalists as educated partners ensures the transmission of vital information for the benefit of the public.

Today, in new democracies such as Romania, the media are

still confronted with establishing their roles and responsibilities. The existence of a free and objective media is a new phenomenon. While it doesn’t yet totally exist, there are journalists who are beginning to specialize in different fields, such as women’s health, and break new ground by reporting on topics that were formerly seen as taboo.

The Role of the Journalist

No matter who we are, information gives us more power because the more we know, the more we can effect change both on a personal and societal level. One way we acquire knowledge is through the media, whose role is to disseminate information to an audience, thereby empowering them. The mass media cannot exist without an audience, and newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio stations with large audiences are considered successful and powerful.

Because of this relationship, journalists also have power, but at the same time they have a great responsibility to educate and inform the public honestly. Disseminating information can be seen as either manipulation or education, and it is the responsibility of a good journalist to educate and not manipulate. Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty.”

Journalists are intermediaries, located between specialists (in this case healthcare professionals) and the public. As such they must be very careful to explain information in a clear, exact, and understandable manner, translating medical terms and statistical data into accessible language. It is essential that journalists make sure that what they disseminate is accurate. One way to do this is to find sources who are able to clarify medical terminology and provide good and general information. These partnerships benefit both parties, as the article gains

In June 1999, 40 female journalists from Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Moldova, and Ukraine participated in the “Reporting on Women’s Healthcare” conference sponsored by the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF), under a grant from Humana Inc. and The Humana Foundation. The three-day training workshop was designed to help journalists learn how to translate the complex language and technical issues of modern healthcare into accurate and easy-to-understand health messages for target groups. It stressed the importance of establishing strong collaborations and communications between journalists and medical professionals so that health issues can be written about and reported on accurately.



credibility by quoting a medical professional, and the professional and his or her institution gains exposure.

Health Communication

An important question to consider is “What is health communication?” While disseminating information means communicating, health communication entails more than just telling someone something. It is a process based on a clear strategy and a group of planned activities designed to promote the change to healthier behavior. Good health communication must

- use known advertising and marketing strategies to get the message across;
- focus on specific population groups after careful research about the knowledge and practices of these groups;
- be tested on audiences to make sure the message is clearly understood and does not create confusion; and
- be designed to meet some measurable health objective.

A good communications plan uses many channels, including mass media vehicles, brochures, posters, other printed materials, and/or interpersonal communication to get the message “out.” Strategies might include media campaigns, sex education classes in schools, workshops on family planning, and videos and printed materials produced specifically for teenagers, women, or doctors and nurses. All of these programs need the collaboration of health specialists, sociologists, educators, and public health authorities. With the help of journalists, such resources can be more easily disseminated to the population. Without the media’s help, any campaign or program will be less successful or have fewer positive results.

about behaviors or treatment therapies. The media are in a unique position, having access at the same time to sources of information and to the population.

It is also important to remember that what is reported in the media are an indicator of the level of a population’s knowledge. Additionally, this information indicates what is important to the public as well as issues about which they are thinking. Through the media, the effectiveness and success of a particular public health campaign can be measured and the community’s health literacy improved.

Treating the Media as a Partner

More than 10 years after leaving behind a broken communist regime, most CEE countries have experienced major changes in social, economic, and political realms. But, in other important areas, such as women’s health, change is progressing at a very slow pace. Unfortunately, Romania has some of the lowest women’s health indicators in Europe, which results in both high physical and psychological costs to women and, by extension, to the rest of society. Because of historic political practices, most Romanians are unaware of the grave consequences reflected in women’s health data

and have little information about family planning. All of this implies that neither the government nor the media recognized women’s health as a social priority. But that is starting to change. Through the efforts of some government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as the media, the Romanian Ministry of Health recently declared reproductive health to be a major priority, and many more journalists are reporting on these issues.

Most of the health campaigns waged during the last four years had the important goals of improving the health status of women by encouraging them to make healthy choices in the

In September-October 1997 and April-May 1999, national information, education, and communication campaigns sponsored by the Ministry of Health in Romania [with the support of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)] were held about the importance of family planning. The mass media and governmental and non-governmental organizations were all involved. The motto was “The decision is yours. Go to planning family offices.” All of these activities benefited from collaboration between the local Health Prevention and Health Education Departments and the media. Articles and audio and visual materials about family planning and modern contraceptive methods were distributed to all facets of the media. Newspapers printed the articles and radio and TV stations broadcast talk shows featuring interviews about the subject.



Photo courtesy of Daniela Bucur.

Romanian AIHA partners and a member of the media: Dr. Otilia Casian-Botez, director of the Iasi Women’s Wellness Center; Dr. Dan Tomosoiu, director, Clinical Hospital “Elena Doamna;” Dr. Daniela Bucur, news and health editor, National Broadcasting Society of Romania-Radio Constanta; Manuela Cristea, information coordinator, Iasi Women’s Wellness Center; and Dr. Vasile Sarbu, head of Medical University, Constanta.

Media as Resource

Considering the insufficient financial resources allocated to healthcare in countries such as Romania, using the media to promote public health education is a cost-effective way to get information to the people. For instance, explaining the facts and giving complete information about health problems, such as the increased incidence of STDs or the existence of new options in the treatment of breast cancer, can help citizens make informed decisions



Dr. Daniela Bucur attempts to get a quote from US Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala during a reception at the AIHA Annual Conference.

way they live their lives. An underlying belief in all of this effort is that women transmit what they learn about health to the community through their roles as mothers and primary caretakers, or, in the words of a catchy phrase: “when you educate a man, you educate an individual, but when you educate women, you educate a whole family.” We are happy to report, that through promotional messages transmitted by local and national TV and radio stations and through well-written articles about these issues, women’s attitudes about health, as witnessed in improving health indicators, are beginning to change in Romania.

Campaigns such as these offer the media the opportunity to write substantively about health issues and to collaborate with local or national partners, like ministries of health, health departments, local authorities, NGOs, drug stores, pharmaceutical companies, medical specialists, and others. At the same time, community stakeholders such as the media can work with health professionals and well-known social, athletic, or art celebrities to organize important events that promote public health messages.

The media are a community resource and should be seen as such by AIHA partners. They can be used to educate, promote, and facilitate many of the events that happen during a partnership. For example, Constanta/Louisville Healthy Communities partners frequently and actively sought involvement from the media, and all visits from Louisville Healthy Communities partners to Constanta received coverage from television, radio, and print media.

Currently, the Constanta media consists of three newspapers, five local radio stations, and three television stations. In Constanta, like everywhere in Romania, things started to change after 1990. Before then, local TV and radio stations did not exist and health issues such as contraceptive methods, sexuality, “safe sex,” and honest HIV/AIDS statistics were not discussed. In

particular, women’s health issues were considered taboo. But over the past 10 years, the local media have grown and gradually become interested in reporting on health issues.

Between 1997 and 1998, with the support of a USAID expert on communications, health, and population, the media became more actively involved in the process of changing the health behavior of community members—especially in those areas related to women’s health—and the complexity and importance of reproductive health issues began to be reported on in

meaningful ways. In cooperation with the Constanta Public Health and Public Education Department (see “Strategies for Developing a Health Promotion Campaign,” page 24) local radio and television stations produced talk shows on which guests discussed family planning, cancer prevention, and the importance of educating young people about sex. The goal of these shows was to initiate a real partnership between the experts in reproductive health and the media, as well as to establish a dialogue between health professionals and the community. Journalists were given the facts behind health indicators, especially about the risks associated with abortions, and they in turn were able to affect the actions of citizens by getting reliable messages about health out to the public. Radio Constanta broke new ground by being the first radio station in the county to broadcast talk shows about AIDS prevention and family planning with the participation of local experts. An exciting development in the near future will be a weekly 30-minute talk show about domestic violence to be hosted by the author of this article.

Ultimately it is the mutual cooperation and respect among journalists, healthcare professionals, public health officials, and government representatives that determines the success of a public health campaign. As a journalist, it is vital to cover all the important medical news, attend health events, and inform the public about activities in the healthcare system. As a healthcare professional it is vital to respond to requests from journalists who need your expertise. And as AIHA partners, public health professionals, or government officials, it is important to see members of the media as partners who can help you reach your goals.

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A new woman’s health campaign made a debut in March 2000 in Constanta, Cluj, and Iasi counties. The campaign is organized by the Ministry of Health of Romania in collaboration with USAID and Johns Hopkins University. Its major goals are to encourage women to improve their health through learning more about their bodies, visiting family planning clinics more often, and using modern contraceptive methods. These messages will be disseminate to population through local and national media, including print, radio, and television.