

Medicine and the media: a synergistic combination?

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Abstract

As second year medical students, we took part in an interdisciplinary journalism project that examined the links between fishmeal and fish farming industries in various parts of the world. Through this experience, we came to acknowledge a synergistic pairing between the fields of journalism and medicine by examining the similarities and differences in terms of information gathering and knowledge translation. Many journalism principles can aid immensely in the translation of medical knowledge to the general population, including the ability to construct a relevant narrative, gather information with open-ended and closed-ended questions, and ultimately produce a story that is influential and applicable to the audience.

In December 2018, we traveled to the coastline of Peru as fellows with the Global Reporting Program, an investigative journalism initiative based at the University of British Columbia (UBC), which aims to bring under-reported issues around the world into focus. We accompanied a skilled team of UBC Masters of Journalism students who were conducting a reporting project on the global impact of fishmeal production and its supply chain.

As a team, the journalism students worked to deliver a story that highlighted the global impact of fishmeal and fish farming industries in Peru, China, and Western Africa. As two medical students among this group, we often felt out of place and repeatedly asked ourselves what we could offer. We reasoned that we were able to contribute to the integrity of the project by offering a perspective on health-related topics in the story. Furthermore, through our experiences, we found ourselves drawing multiple comparisons between gathering information for medicine and for media. It has been suggested that the media may not accurately convey medical information,^{1,2} but after participating in this project, we concluded that techniques used in medicine and journalism could be complementary in the realm of knowledge translation.

We learned from the journalism students about acquiring information and concluded that their approach was quite different from what is taught in medicine. In medicine, evidence is gathered from a variety of sources in the literature upon which conclusions are based on. In journalism, it is more important to first identify a strong story, then search for powerful “characters” who can reinforce that point. This is a more direct way to illustrate a particular issue, but it can lead to scenarios in the media where contradicting viewpoints may be excluded from the story in order to strengthen its central theme. In best journalism practice, this exclusion is done strategically and in an informed manner.

A noteworthy part of our field work was spent in Chimbote, a fishing-centric coastal city approximately 400 kilometers north of the capital, Lima. This city was once a pristine beach destination, but over the last few decades has become increasingly polluted as fishmeal and fish oil production, canning, and frozen fish industries have implemented factories and plants. Our first impression of Chimbote was the overwhelmingly nauseating stench of rotten fish that seemed

to permeate the entire city. A local biologist stated that this smell stemmed from a five to ten-meter layer of sludge at the bottom of the Bay of Chimbote, and illustrated this by digging up a bucketful while we were out on a boat. This sludge is a consequence of decades of unregulated dumping of unprocessed sewage and effluent from the fishmeal factories into the bay. The journalism lens placed great emphasis on the powerful image of the sludge itself, since it would provoke questions and concerns in the audience. Conversely, the medical approach to this environmental issue would undoubtedly be to focus on investigating the health consequences, such as respiratory and dermatological complications that would result from exposure to this unprocessed sewage. That day with the biologist provided us with an undeniable link between industrial activity, environmental damage, and human health consequences evidenced in the people of Chimbote.

In addition to participation in field work, the journalism team provided us an opportunity to act as the “team leader,” where we were responsible for coordinating and conducting interviews. We worked with a local nutritionist and visited a small fishing community, where we investigated the common nutritional deficits and health problems in the area. In preparation for that day, we discussed interviewing strategies with a journalism colleague. She highlighted the importance of starting with open-ended questions and subsequently moving to closed-ended questions. We immediately drew the parallel to medicine where we are instructed to start patient interviews with open-ended questions and later integrate closed-ended questions to obtain specific information. We were struck by how similar principles can apply in professions that one would assume to be vastly different. Though these techniques may be similar, the focus of the interview differs. The medical interview is focused on obtaining the most accurate health information from a patient, whereas a journalism interview works to evoke emotion by gathering quotes from the character that will most resonate with their storyline and target audience.

Together, journalistic and medical interview approaches can work in tandem to elicit a response in the audience that may subsequently inspire change or action. The utility of influential reporting is particularly prominent in healthcare, where the information gathered by health professionals must be disseminated and applied in a variety of settings. Medicine tends to focus on objective findings, with a subjective story lending support and additional details. In contrast, the priority in journalism is a subjective story, with objective findings providing support. Complex medical topics can be made more tangible to the general public when combining subjective stories with objective findings; appealing narratives are likely to influence health-related changes. In our medical education thus far, we have had opportunities for interprofessional education and collaboration, but exclusively with

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other health professions. Participating in this project exposed us to methods of knowledge translation that may not be traditionally utilized in healthcare, and allowed us to work with a multidisciplinary team to highlight the healthcare implications of an important global issue.

The topics addressed in this project—health, environmental change, and economics—are of huge importance to the public. The challenge lies in presenting these issues in a way that inspires action. Combining the reporting techniques commonly used in news media with those used in medicine can be a method to motivate the public to make these changes. Although they seem different in principle, this global interdisciplinary experience demonstrated that these techniques are quite complementary and combining them will lead to a more powerful story, a stronger response, and ultimately, a more successful knowledge translation. To illustrate an example of these synergistic benefits, we would like to direct the reader's attention to the final product of this project, titled "The fish you don't know you eat," which includes a webpage³ and short films^{4,5} that aired on NBC Nightly News.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have declared no conflict of interest.

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