

# Media and Mental Health in Uganda

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The media is largely regarded as an important stakeholder in health service delivery, with a great influence on public attitudes. However, little is known about its interest in mental health and the guiding factors that influence media coverage of mental health issues. This article describes the importance accorded to mental health by the media and the factors that influence media coverage of mental health issues in Uganda. **Method:** Semi-structured interviews were held with representatives from six prominent media houses as part of the situational analysis of the mental health system in Uganda. Data was analyzed using Nvivo 7 qualitative data analysis software. **Results:** The media was found to be interested and actively involved in health initiatives, but with little attention devoted to mental health. Coverage and interest in mental health was noted to be mainly dependent on the individual journalists' interests, and mostly for personal reasons. Low interest was largely attributed to mental health being perceived as a non-priority area, and the fact that mental illness is not a major contributor to mortality. Media coverage and reporting is guided by prioritization of the Health Department. **Conclusion:** The media in Uganda is an important stakeholder in the health care system with a key role of advocacy, publicity and mass education. Media houses however are less interested in mental health as evidenced by low coverage of mental health issues. This calls for advocacy and sensitization as a way of persuading media for more involvement in mental health initiatives.

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## Introduction

The media houses are important stakeholders in health service delivery and they have a great influence on fostering public attitudes through their vital role of sensitization and publicity. Considerable research has concluded that the media is the public's most significant source of information about mental illness.<sup>1</sup> Studies conducted to determine the effect of mass media on the public's belief systems have concluded that mass media's power to influence the public perception and the degree to which people are exposed to media's representations combine to make mass media one of the most significant influences in developed societies.<sup>2</sup> However, little is known about media's interest in mental health and the guiding factors for wider media coverage of

mental health issues in developing countries.

This article explores and describes how media portrays mental health issues, the importance it accords to mental health, and the factors that influence media coverage of mental health issues in Uganda. The article summarizes findings from interviews held with some representatives of print and electronic media as well as a few other participants from the general public, who commented on media and mental health issues. This is part of a broader study, whose aim was to conduct a situational analysis of the mental health system in Uganda, as part of the activities of the Mental Health and Poverty Project.<sup>3</sup>

## Method

This was a qualitative study where key informant semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of six purposively selected media houses. The selected participants were health reporters and health writers from six prominent media houses (both print and electronic), that have a wide coverage in the country. In total, 10 participants from the six

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media houses were interviewed, and they took part in these semi-structured interviews individually. Three of the ten participants were women, and seven were men. Two of the participants (one female and one male) were senior editors of health news in the print media, the rest being health news reporters and writers. The 10 participants were part of a wide range of stakeholders who took part in the study. This article is thus based on the views of the participants from media houses as well as the few other participants who commented on media and mental health issues.

The interviews were conducted in English, transcribed verbatim, and coded. Data analysis was done by way of the Thematic analysis approach using NVIVO 7 qualitative data analysis software. A framework analysis approach<sup>4</sup> was adopted. By this approach, certain themes and sub-themes were agreed upon by the investigators at all the research sites, based on the objectives of the study. A single framework for analysis was thus developed, and specific views emerging from the interviews were added into the framework in the process.

## Results

### *Role and interest of media in mental health*

The participants generally agreed that the media is an important stakeholder that plays a key role in the health care system through publicity and mass education, linking the policy makers and the public. It also emerged that the media has a lot of influence on the public perception of issues and its active involvement could make a bigger impact in society. Some of the participants however noted that while the media is good at giving the public information and increasing people's awareness, it may not be very good at increasing their knowledge. This was attributed to the fact that fewer academics and health professionals readily avail the media with recent and reliable information on topical health issues, for public consumption, which was perceived to be a major challenge.

The findings indicated that the media in Uganda is generally interested in and is involved with health issues. However, more attention goes to those areas that are given higher priority by the Health Department or those that are more dramatic and having more events. The participants from the media affirmed that fewer members of the press have interest in mental health, and the overall interest of the media is less in mental health than general health. Some of the participants argued that fewer mental health professionals and users readily come up to involve the media; that they tend to be silent about mental health issues and the latest developments in mental health care.

### *Determining factors for media's interest*

It emerged that the magnitude of the health problem (whether of a global concern or not), the level of investment in monetary terms and the political attachment that may be associated with a particular health condition are key factors in determining the extent of media coverage. The prevalence and impact of mental health problems are believed to be enormous and mental illness is recognized as an important development concern. However, mental health does not get much attention because mental illness is not so sensational in terms of mortality and physical consequences, so as to attract much public attention. As regards health reporting, the media focuses on those conditions that are striking and appear more "exciting", especially those with high mortality rates. Features and articles on mental health therefore do not compete favourably as they are presumed to be less

appealing to the public; a point echoed by one of the context informants:

*"...mental illness causes some sort of slow suffering that is not dramatic enough to capture the attention of people around the person. Now, because it lacks that drama, it doesn't capture media's attention"* (Health writer, Print media source 3)

Also preference is often given to articles that match the interests of the editors and managers of particular media channels. Interest in mental health is mainly by individual journalists, and mostly for personal reasons, which range from mere empathy to having loved ones with a mental illness.

*"...Of course having relatives with such a problem inspired me to try to find out how that comes about and how it can be solved. That's how my interest comes about... to know more about mental health. Otherwise I grew up seeing people with mental complications all over the place"* (Health writer, Print media source 2)

### *Importance of mental health to media*

Wider media coverage of mental health issues is usually on commemorative occasions such as World Mental Health Day. The health conditions and related campaigns in which some influential people are involved apparently attract more attention in the public and are therefore more selling for the media. In Uganda, no influential persons such as cultural leaders, politicians or celebrities have publicly identified or associated themselves with mental health and mental illness unlike in other conditions such as HIV/AIDS or immunization campaigns.

Findings further affirmed that present day media is more liberal as regards what to publish or not, and driven by profit making. It shows more concern with issues that are more appealing to the public, so as to attract more sales:

*"...at times the media gets biased. We want to write about issues that excite the people more... such as politics. Especially in our culture here, people enjoy reading about politics more than health"* (Health writer, Print media source 1)

*"...I don't think media takes a conscious approach to highlight the problems of the mentally sick people. It is not something that will help you sell a paper. It is not something that helps you generate revenue by way of advertising"* (Newspaper columnist, print media source 2)

A key weakness identified on the side of the media is that journalists and news editors in general have not yet developed the culture of making health news more appealing so as to compete with articles in other areas such as politics. It is certain that the style of packaging the information matters a lot. The way articles on health, including mental health are usually packaged results in only a few interested people reading the news. Participants from the print media argued that articles on health are often very long and written in a medical language. They considered this an ineffective approach, as the public tends to

show preference to material written in a 'journalistic style', very simple and easy to understand.

As recommendations, participants identified a need to highlight the extent of the burden of mental illness and a need to sensitize the media houses on mental health issues. The need for more engagement of the media by the mental health professionals, especially through dissemination of information as well as informing the media of the latest developments in the field was also emphasized. It is hoped that this would interest the media more in providing wider coverage and publicity for mental health.

## Discussion

The findings clearly indicated that mental illness, as a non-communicable disease, receives less attention from the media in Uganda. It should however be noted that non-communicable diseases account for the majority of the global burden of diseases and are projected to increase markedly in the coming decades within low and middle income countries as well.<sup>5</sup>

It was also apparent that present day media in Uganda is profit driven and thus concentrates on topical issues which attract higher sales or advertising. This observation is in line with other studies that have pointed out the fact that health workers often have difficulty separating a 'worthy' story from a 'newsworthy' story. To a journalist, the latter is crucial, as the piece must stand out with a striking headline, a powerful introduction and an interesting story. Credibility, accuracy and human relevance alone are insufficient to ensure passage into print.

The journalistic profession must be seen for what it is: a tough, competitive world, driven by a need to sell newspapers full of exciting stories to be read easily by busy people.<sup>2</sup> This need, which the press contends unapologetically, fully justifies the use of sensational and captivating headlines which at times may cause concern to mental health workers and their patients. Given that their primary objective is to gain access to readers' minds, the end therefore justifies the means. The responsibility to inform and educate the public appears to be only a secondary motive of the journalistic profession. Mental health professionals can increase their chances of expressing their ideas and opinions in print if they first understand the motives of the press and the work of the jobbing journalist.<sup>6</sup> It therefore becomes clear that if mental health professionals are to make better use of the media, they must develop their sense of what makes a good story that conveys the educative as well as attractive message.

The participants from the media acknowledged the fact that fewer members of the press have interest in mental health, but they also believed that the mental health professionals do not readily involve the media. The implication was thus that the mental health community is partly responsible for the low coverage of mental health issues by the media in Uganda.

Considerable research has concluded that the media are the public's most significant source of information about mental illness<sup>1</sup>, with a review of literature on mass media and mental illness indicating that media representations of mental illness tend to promote negative images and stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> The negative media coverage has been found to have a direct and harmful impact on the lives of people with mental illness. Wahl argues that the stigma resulting from the negative media coverage impedes recovery, triggers discrimination and creates barriers to seeking and finding decent housing, employment and education.<sup>6,7</sup> Negative images in the mass media influence not only the general

public but also health care professionals. Although professionals are trained, they are subjected to and influenced by the same misconceptions and negative imagery as the public.<sup>6,7</sup> Many other studies have found a definite connection between negative media portrayals of mental illness and the public's negative attitudes towards people with mental health issues. If public perception of mental illness is based on negative and false images perpetuated by the media, there is a danger that government responses to systems and people in the mental health field will also be based on these false realities rather than on the true needs and issues of people suffering from mental illness.<sup>8,9</sup>

It should however be noted that while the media often perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes of mental illness, if properly harnessed, they may also be used to challenge prejudice, inform and initiate debate and help to combat the stigma experienced by people with mental illness and their carers.<sup>6</sup>

We note that while international research suggests that mental illness tends to be portrayed negatively in the mass media in both the news and entertainment media, the little media coverage of mental health in Uganda so far suggests that the Ugandan media is less prejudiced and has less of a tendency to portray mental illness negatively. Media coverage and stories on mental health have been oriented towards sensitization of the public.

## Conclusion

The media in Uganda is an important stakeholder in the health care system playing a significant role of publicity and mass education, though still with limited coverage. However, the media shows less interest in mental health in terms of coverage and reporting as compared to other health conditions. It is more open to those health conditions that are highly prioritized by the Health Department or attract more public attention, thereby contributing to higher sales. This therefore calls for active engagement and lobbying of the media for more involvement in mental health initiatives.

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