

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Family Planning, Abortion, and HIV in Ghanaian Print Media: A 15-Month Content Analysis of a National Ghanaian Newspaper

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Abstract

This study assessed coverage of Reproductive Health (RH) issues—family planning (FP), abortion, and HIV—in the Ghanaian *Daily Graphic* newspaper. Using the composite week sampling technique, the researcher analyzed the contents of 62 editions of the paper. Prominence was measured using various attributes, and differences in mean coverage over time were assessed using analysis of variance. This review shows that coverage of RH issues was extraordinarily poor, less than 1 percent each for FP, abortion, and HIV. RH news that was covered was given little prominence. These findings support the popular impression that the *Daily Graphic* does not give priority to reproductive health issues in its coverage. RH advocates need to develop innovative means of integrating RH content into existing media outlets. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2010; 14[4]: 83-89).

Résumé

Planification familiale, avortement et VIH dans la presse écrite ghanéenne. Analyse du contenu couvrant une période de 15 mois d'un journal ghanéen national. Cette étude a évalué la couverture des questions de la **santé de reproduction** (SR)—la planification familiale (PF), l'avortement et le VIH – dans le journal ghanéen, *Daily Graphic*. Les chercheurs ont analysé les contenus des 62 numéros du journal à l'aide de la technique d'échantillon de la semaine composite. On a mesuré l'importance en se servant des attributs divers et les différences dans les couvertures moyennes à travers le temps ont été évaluées à travers l'analyse des variables. Cette étude montre que la couverture des questions portant sur la SR était extraordinairement médiocre, moins d'un pourcent chacun pour la PF, l'avortement et le VIH. Les nouvelles concernant la SR n'ont pas été accordées une attention importante. Ces résultats ont renforcé l'impression populaire que le *Daily Graphic* n'accorde pas de priorité aux affaires qui portent sur la santé de reproduction. Les défenseurs de la SR doit développer des moyens innovateurs d'intégrer le contenu de la SR dans la presse actuelle (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2010; 14[4]: 83-89).

Keywords: Family Planning, Abortion, HIV, Content Analysis, Ghana

Introduction

With limited human and financial resources, organizations and groups are experimenting with new ways to reach their audiences, raise awareness, and influence policy—an initiative that includes the use of the press. In Ghana, the press is a powerful tool in advocacy of all kinds. In her book on the press and the political culture in Ghana, Jennifer Hasty locates newspapers at the nexus of Ghanaian news discourse, which is characterized by formal genres of mass media and informal modes of social communication.¹ The press, she notes, contributes significantly to healthy political discourse, national unity, and identity.

In addition to promoting development and national unity, the Ghanaian press has established a distinguished history of political activism.² This feat unfortunately has been achieved at the expense of the principle of proportionality in media reportage. Important issues like health news receive disproportionately low coverage. Local anecdotes and personal communications hint of the preoccupation of the press with politics and sports (Professor Agyemang Badu-Akosa, Director General, Ghana Health Services, personal communications, 2007).

The urgent need for the Ghanaian press to give consideration to health matters, particularly reproductive health (RH) issues, stimulates the interest of this paper. The press as a social

institution without a doubt can be harnessed to promote RH activism. Although it is sometimes argued, rather controversially, that the press is already reporting/over reporting on HIV and abortion, repetition is essential to reinforce the message, educate new audiences, and sustain individual behaviour. This is particularly true at a time when RH activists are faced with the almost daily task of correcting common misconceptions on these issues.

This article is based on a 15-month content analysis of a national Ghanaian newspaper. Far from being just an academic exercise, content analysis can have actionable results. The method's suitability and validity for an exercise of this nature have previously been documented.³⁻⁵ In the present study, the method was employed to assess both the prominence and quantity of reportage on family planning, abortion, and HIV by Ghana's best-selling newspaper, *Daily Graphic*.

Methods

Researchers did a content analysis of the *Daily Graphic* to assess the coverage of family planning, abortion, and HIV in Ghana. The choice of this method was informed by studies affirming that the method ably evaluates communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables.^{4, 5} Bernard Berelson had earlier described this analytic technique as being sufficiently systematic, objective, and quantitative to analyze or describe the manifest content of a mass medium of communication.³

Selection of a Newspaper

Currently about 40 newspapers are published in Ghana. The state funds two daily newspapers (*Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times*) and two weekly entertainment papers (*The Mirror* and *The Weekly Spectator*). Since 1950, the *Daily Graphic* has been the most widely circulated newspaper in Ghana. Research by Adewale Maja-Pierce in 1996 quoted its daily circulation figure to be approximately 200,000 issues,⁶ which are distributed throughout the 10 regions of Ghana via train, bus, and courier. The distant second in terms of circulation rate is *The Ghanaian Times*, with a daily rate of 150,000.⁶

Independent newspapers include *The Ghanaian Chronicle*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Dispatch*, *The Insight*, *The Enquirer*, *The Daily Post*, *The Ghanaian Lens*, *The Watchman*, *The Free Press*, and *The Public Agenda*. Of these, the four most influential are *The Ghanaian Chronicle*, *The Independent*, *The Free Press*, and *The Public Agenda*. The circulation figures for these papers, according to the research conducted by Maja-Pierce

in 1996, were: *The Ghanaian Chronicle* (40,000 copies per day), *The Independent* (35,000 copies per day), and *The Free Press* (70,000 copies per day). *Even though the circulation figures of the Public Agenda during the same period could not be accessed, it is not expected to be more than 70,000 copies per day.*

With few exceptions, all the private/independent newspapers are produced in Accra, and circulation is concentrated there as well. Being the only paper with a nationwide coverage, and with the highest circulation rates⁶, the *Daily Graphic*, was justified as the paper of choice for the exercise.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The universe of the newspaper editions from which the sample was taken was the entire editions of the *Daily Graphic* published between January 1, 2008, and March 31, 2009—exactly 443 editions. There are no issues on Sundays, and some statutory public holidays. For the content analysis, the researcher used the composite week sampling technique, where one day is drawn every week of every month throughout the sampling period. It is a tried and tested method. The work of Riffe et al. demonstrates that the composite week sampling technique is superior to both a random sample and a consecutive day sample when dealing with newspaper content.⁷ This work confirmed the findings of an earlier study, which showed that composite week sampling produces results that are just as valid as the analysis of a great deal more.³

In the current study, the sampling started with the first edition of January 2008; this was a Tuesday. Wednesday was chosen for the second week, Thursday for the third week, and Friday for the fourth week. Saturday was the first edition for February 2008; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday were chosen, respectively, for the second, third, and fourth weeks. The same pattern was used for the rest of the 13 months (Figure 1). In all, 62 editions were selected.

The Coding Sheet

Data collection was done with the aid of a coding sheet, which contained all the relevant variables: date of publication, total number of stories, total number of health stories, total number of RH stories, total number of FP stories, total number of abortion stories, total number of HIV story; type of story, column area, picture enhancement, picture size, headline size, source of stories, byline, location/dateline of story, and main speaker in the story. Two groups of coders coded the data within one month. Intercoder reliability assessment was done using the Kappa statistic, which showed a strong degree of agreement

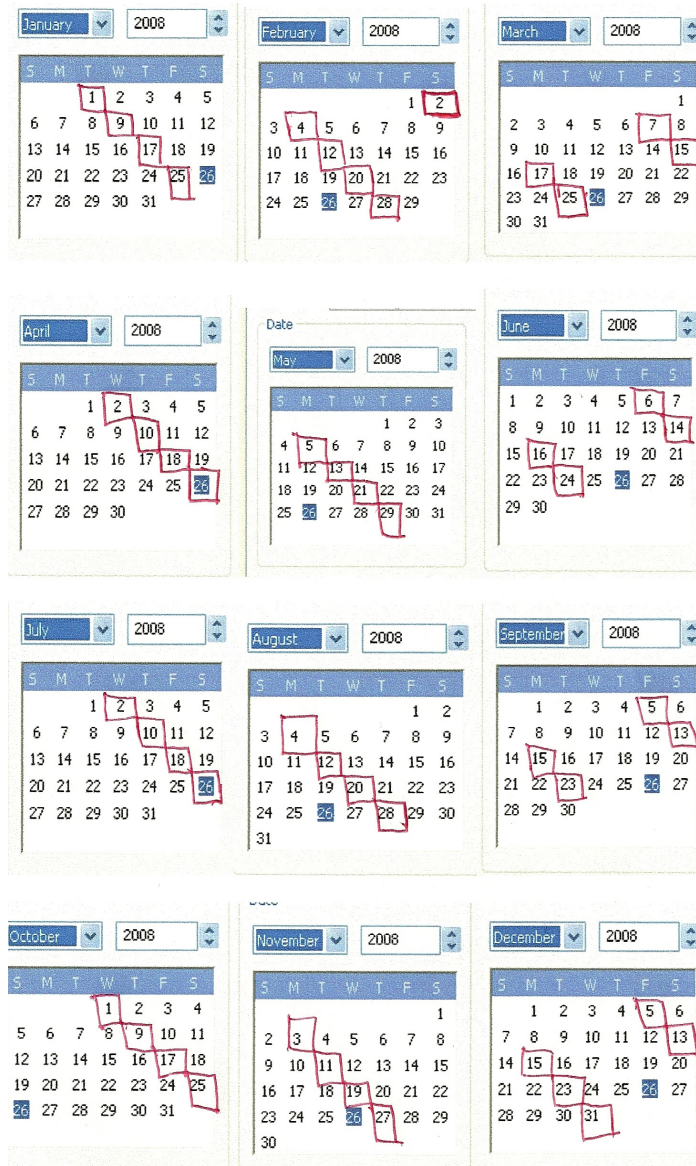


Figure 1: The composite week sampling technique (Jan 2008 to Dec 2008)

between the coding groups for the two main variables: total number of stories on health, Kappa statistic = 0.90; and total number of stories on RH, Kappa statistic = 0.98. Minor disagreements were settled during the data cleaning stage before the actual data analysis was done.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the theme of stories—straight news or in-depth analysis (feature, editorial, opinions, and letters to the editor). Also assessed were the numbers of health columns in relation to the regular columns in the newspaper. Excluded from the analysis were all adverts, comics,

obituaries, weather reports, announcements, commodity quotations, and stock markets.

Measurement of Prominence of Reportage

Prominence of reportage was measured using the following attributes: theme of story, headline size, column space/area, page placement, and enhancement of stories with pictures.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was done using SPSS Version 15.0 (SPSS Inc. Chicago). Preliminary assessments of normality of the distributions of key continuous

variables, such as total number of stories on health and total number of stories on RH, were done using normal probability plots and Shapiro-Wilks statistics. Such assessments showed that the distributions of these variables approximated normal probability distribution.

To assess trends in coverage over time, the 15 months sampled were grouped into five mutually exclusive periods. The differences in mean coverage across these periods were then assessed using the analysis of variance statistical technique. The choice of this tool was informed by the above preliminary diagnostic tests. Additionally all 62 editions of the newspaper were perused for major events that could have undermined or enhanced the reportage of RH news.

Results

Coverage and News Space Allotted to RH Stories

This review shows that coverage of the four RH issues was incredibly poor, less than 1 percent for each. Of the close to 5,000 news items analyzed (including straight news, features, editorials, and letters to the editor), 197 (4.2 percent) were on health, and 25 (0.5 percent) were RH-related. Specifically, there were four (0.09 percent) news items on FP, two (0.04 percent) on abortion, and 19 (0.4 percent) on HIV (Table 1).

The 62 editions of the paper contained a total space = 2,937,962.00cm². Of this, only 5,433.95cm² representing 0.2 percent was dedicated to RH news. The mean number of non-health stories per newspaper issue (excluding adverts, comics, obituaries, weather reports, announcements, commodity quotations, and stock markets) was 75.64. For news items on health, this statistic was 3.18, and for RH news, it was less than 1 (0.47).

Table 1: Coverage of RH news in relation to others (N=4,690)

News category	Number	Percent
Non-health news	4443	94.8
Health news	197	4.2
HIV and AIDS news	19	0.4
Family planning news	4	0.1
Abortion news	2	0.0
All three reproductive health news	25	0.5
Total	4,665	100.0

With respect to the attention given to health in relation to the regular columns in the newspaper,

only one such column exists. Titled "You and Your Health," the column covers generic health matters and is allocated a full page of the newspaper on Wednesdays. The other regular columns featured in the paper from Monday through Friday are World News, Inside Africa, Editorial/Features, Letters, Education, Politics, Regional/Metro News, General News, Business, Classifieds, Funeral Announcements, and Sports. Also featured on specific days are Gender and Children (Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays), Women's World (Thursdays), and Literary/Arts and Entertainment (Saturdays).

Prominence of Reportage

The analysis revealed that almost all the stories (96 percent) were straight news and were relegated to the middle pages of the papers. The distribution of these news items among the various pages of the paper were: center page (4 percent), middle pages (96 percent), and none placed at the back page or the front page. A considerable proportion of the RH news items (63 percent) were not enhanced with pictures.

Trends in Reportage over Time

Data on trends in reportage across the 15-month period are presented in Figure 2. The highest time of reporting health news was April to June 2008, and the lowest for RH news was the same period. However, when comparisons are made of each of these news items across the five periods, no statistically significant differences were observed. Coverage of health news was comparable across the five periods [F (4, 61) = 0.96; p = 0.44, as was coverage on RH [F (4, 61) = 1.49; p = 0.22]. The assessment of prominent events occurring throughout the period noted the following: the Ghana oil find, the hosting of the 2008 African Cup of Nations by Ghana, the visitation of Ghana by President George W. Bush of USA, and the 2008 General Elections in Ghana. Coverage of these major newsworthy events did not seem to influence in any way the reportage on RH news.

Discussion

This content analysis of Ghana's *Daily Graphic* on its coverage of reproductive health matters shows that very little attention (in terms of quantity and prominence of reportage) was given to this category of news. Local speculations have long hinted at the preoccupation of Ghana's press with politics and sports at the expense of reportage on health matters. Missing, however, has been evidence in support of, or against, these speculations. This

article provides evidence in support of the above local anecdotal concerns. It discusses the coverage

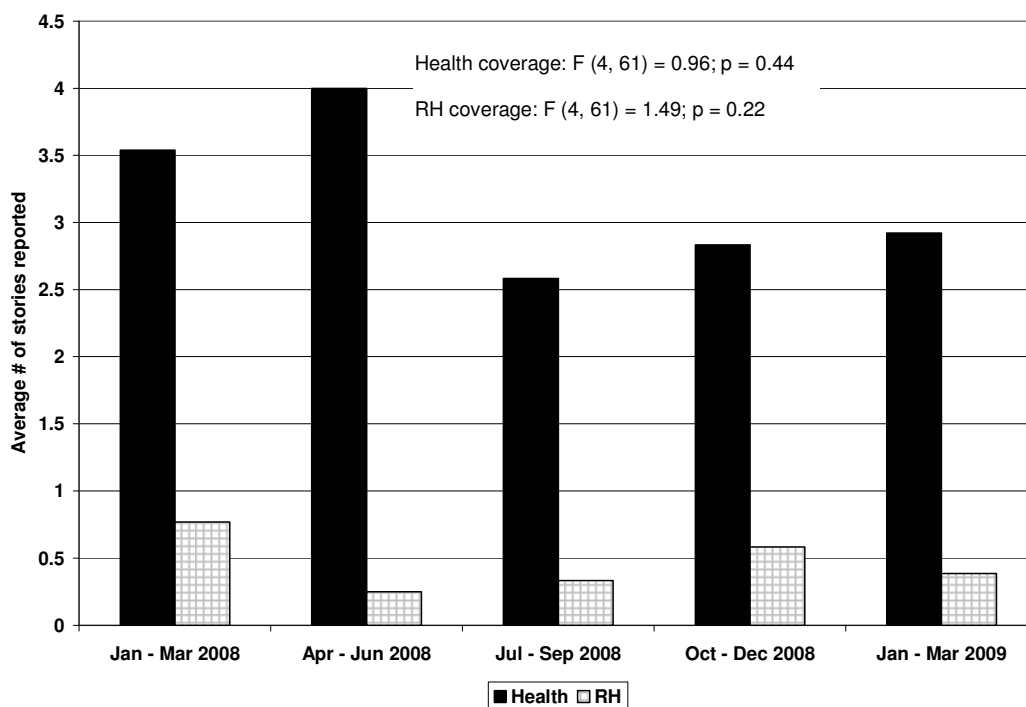


Figure 2: Trends in reportage of health news, and reproductive health news

of reproductive health news by the most widely circulated newspaper in Ghana.

According to a study conducted in the late 1990s, the press is a powerful tool in advocacy of all kinds, especially in Ghana¹. This study by Jennifer Hasty locates newspapers at the nexus of Ghanaian news discourse, which is characterized by formal genres of mass media and informal modes of social communication.¹ Against this background, the possibility of harnessing the press as a social institution to promote reproductive health advocacy can easily be seen.

Unfortunately, the evidence provided by this study does not support the above prospect. The importance attached to RH stories was incredibly poor, with percent coverage less than 1 (<1%). Answers to the question of what might have caused this outrageously low coverage should be important to RH activists. Three possible factors may account for it: First is the lack of appreciation by Ghanaian journalists of the importance of RH news. To explain their attitude, the history of the state-press marriage in Ghana is worth reviewing. Whilst this may not be within the precinct of this paper, it is worth noting that, the state media apparatus since the 1960s has been applying a variety of techniques to ensure that the government of the day receives a significant and friendly reportage. In particular, the state dailies, including the *Daily Graphic* (the paper under

discussion), has consistently been in support of the agenda of the state.⁸

The second reason for low RH coverage stems from the production-for-profit principle. Like most businesses in Ghana, survival in the press business is inextricably linked to the business value of news items. As a result, significant portions of the papers are filled with paid-for adverts and the like. The government and the state enterprises are responsible for submitting a substantial number of these adverts to the state press. This practice is viewed opportunistically by the press as a source of additional revenue beyond official state provisions. The sad truth is that in an uncertain economic environment, many local businesses work on the principle of profit for survival and not of proportionality. It is therefore not surprising that very little attention is given to health or RH news, which is viewed as unsalable.

In fact, studies that have examined allocation of content space as a measure of resource allocation concur that resource allocation is directly proportional to coverage.⁹⁻¹¹ The issue regarding whether or not health/RH activists should consider paying to have their views inked by the press demands further exploration.

The third, and perhaps most troubling, of the possible reasons for the low coverage is the role of RH activists in promoting reportage – through writing in the paper. A careful look at the original

authors of the 25 news items on RH issues [17 staff from *Daily Graphic* (68.0 percent), four from BBC (16.0 percent), and four from other Ghanaian newspapers (16.0 percent)] supports the above assertion, that most of the main speakers in the RH news were non-RH persons.

Prominence as an indicator of the respect journalists give to a news item is as important as coverage. It can be measured in several ways; this study measured five attributes (theme of story, headline size, column space/area, page placement, and enhancement of stories with pictures). The prominence analysis showed that only 0.2 percent of the total news space was dedicated to the RH news, a manifestation of both low coverage of and lack of respect for newsworthy RH matters. This practice may not be peculiar to the *Daily Graphic*. A related study in Nigeria on the coverage of development news had previously reported similar behavior by *The Punch* and *The New Nigerian* newspapers.¹² The Nigerian study showed that compared to political coverage, very few development news articles (3 percent) were published on front-page lead, with most (97 percent) in the middle pages.

To assess whether there were any statistically significant differences in coverage over the 15-month sampling period, the analysis of variance statistical technique was employed. Obvious differences were observed in terms of coverage of health news versus RH news. It is important to note that coding was done in a way that RH news items were recorded as a subset of health news (Figure 2). When comparisons were made of each—RH news and health news coverage across the five periods—no clustering was observed [health coverage: $F(4, 61) = 0.96$; $p = 0.44$], RH coverage: $F(4, 61) = 1.49$; $p = 0.22$]. Additionally, the potential influence of prominent events that took place during the period did not seem to have undermined RH coverage. It may therefore be suggestive that the pattern of reportage on RH news observed in this study is typical of the newspaper.

Harnessing the Press to Promote RH Activism

With limited human and financial resources, organizations and groups are experimenting with new ways to reach their audiences, raise awareness, and influence policy. To RH activists, the press as a social institution could be a potent tool for their work. Success stories from social media tools like Twitter, Face book, and blogs have proved beyond doubt that the press can provide powerful channels for promoting groups' causes. In Ghana, the press has chalked similar successes, but not in health reportage. The Ghanaian press is, for example, well-known for political activism.

One way of harnessing the power of the press will be to strategically and affordably integrate RH news into existing media outlets. A number of strategies are possible:

- i. Sensitizing staff of existing newspapers on the importance of adequately covering RH issues,
- ii. Contributing in the form of feature articles, letters to the editor, and opinions for publication in these papers,
- iii. Making sure RH personnel get acquainted with journalists and show interest in the activities of the press,
- iv. Participating with nontraditional media outlets such as the Facebook and blogs, and
- v. Incorporating health/RH issues into the curriculum for journalistic training.

One may question the potential impact of the above strategies when such factors as cost and illiteracy are taken into account. In Ghana, a copy of the *Daily Graphic* sells for 100 Ghana pesewas (one Ghana cedi) or about 70 U.S. cents, while most of the private papers are about half this price. The cost of these newspapers is quite unaffordable to most urban unemployed and rural peasants. Even those who work may find buying every issue of these papers expensive, given that the national daily minimum wage is GH¢2.66 (US\$1.87).¹³ The question is: How will publishing RH news in the press benefit the poor and illiterate masses if the purchasing audience for these papers is only the white-collar working class, a significant few in our society? Previous research by Jennifer Hasty on the press and political culture in Ghana addresses this issue: The study showed that newspapers are a ubiquitous feature of everyday life, particularly in urban areas.⁸

At neighborhood markets and most major intersections, crowds gather every morning and afternoon to check out the lead stories of all the current newspapers that hang across the frames of the wooden kiosks. It is also common knowledge in Ghana that people who buy newspapers often discuss the stories with an audience on the bus or in a taxi, in the office or at the market. Once read, a paper is never thrown away but passed around for others to read, reaching as many as 10 readers who could relay the news to a network of hundreds. So, one does not necessarily have to purchase a paper to have access to its contents. Moreover, stories from these newspapers are reported and analyzed extensively on the morning shows of many television and radio stations. This analysis (done in both English and the local languages) further magnifies the impact on not only the literate cosmopolitan readership but the majority of the populace who regularly tune in to these talk shows.

Finally, the possibility of influencing the curriculum for journalistic training could be another avenue in harnessing the press for health/RH

promotion. In Ghana, two institutions provide this training: the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) in Accra, where the majority of journalists are trained, and the School of Communication Studies, at the University of Ghana at Legon. Any influence to include modules on health communication in the curriculum may help whip up the interest of would-be journalists to consider a career track in health reportage. In addition to this formal training, the Ghana Journalist Association (GJA) provides a number of short courses to journalists. Although, the Ghanaian journalists are not unionized, the GJA periodically brings all media practitioners in Ghana together for programs, lectures, seminars, and workshops designed to promote continuous professional education and press freedom. It may be beneficial for RH personnel to get involved in the delivery of these programs, during which they could hammer home the relevance of reporting on RH issues.

Limitations of the Findings

This review has some important limitations and may not be fully generalizable to other newspapers in Ghana. First, since only one newspaper was used, the findings may not be representative of the Ghanaian press as a whole. Being one of the four state-funded newspapers in Ghana, the *Daily Graphic* may have coverage and reportage patterns that are vastly different from those of the privately owned newspapers in that country.

Secondly the reportage of the 15-month period could have been influenced by prominent events that took place during the period and may therefore not reflect the paper's true RH coverage. To address this possibility, the researcher looked at the relationship between prominent events occurring throughout the period and reportage on RH news. Their findings showed that coverage of these major newsworthy events did not appear to influence in any way the reportage on RH news.

Conclusion

This analysis has provided evidence that health, and RH in particular, receives poor coverage in Ghanaian media. The finding is a wakeup call for RH activists to look for innovative ways of integrating RH issues into existing media outlets. Sensitization of staff of existing newspapers on the importance of adequately covering RH issues, contributions in the form of feature articles to the papers by RH activists, and partnering with the

press in the implementation of their activities could prove useful.

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