

Insight *and* ACTION

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JOINING THE CONVERSATION: NEWSPAPER JOURNALISTS' VIEWS ON WORKING WITH RESEARCHERS

KEY MESSAGES

- The media can be powerful forces for helping get research used.
- The journalist-researcher relationship is critical to using the media to promote more evidence-based dialogue among policy makers and the public.
- Researchers should treat journalists as knowledge brokers in health policy-making because they bring public attention to issues policy makers are grappling with.

The following is a summary of a journal article by Charlotte Waddell et al.

For many researchers, policy-making remains a “black box” where their knowledge is often outweighed by other influences. On the other hand, journalists can sometimes play a more pivotal role in setting the policy-making agenda because of their power to influence the public. Waddell, Lomas and Bird-Gayson examine the importance of the journalist-researcher relationship, one the authors say can be used by health researchers to effectively get their message out.

In their review of science and health journalism literature, the authors found two striking characteristics: most is researcher-centred; and the central concern of researchers is its accuracy. Based on this, the authors set out to understand the needs and views of journalists working with health researchers to produce healthcare stories to better understand how to harness the media’s potential in getting research used. Overall, the findings suggest the biggest obstacles to reporting on timely health research issues are researchers’ failure to understand the professional realities of journalism and the lack of ongoing relationships between journalists and researchers, which are needed to ensure important stories get told.

Waddell et al. interviewed 12 Canadian newspaper reporters about their experience working with researchers in covering children’s mental health issues. This content area was selected because public policy in this field seldom reflects the findings of health researchers, despite the fact that, as the authors write, “mental health problems are arguably the leading health problems that Canadian children face after infancy.”

The study’s findings fall under three main themes: 1) the role of journalists in the newspaper business and in society; 2) the daily practice of newspaper journalism; and 3) working with researchers.

The role of journalists in the newspaper business and in society

Newspaper journalists have a unique role in society. They continually work to balance business and social responsibility, while trying to maintain their role as social activists, responsible to both their sources and their readers. Determining where the balance lies is often a decision made by the individual journalist through his or her role as editor, columnist or reporter. Journalists in this study were conscious of how different interests and expertise compete for limited newspaper space and how editors ultimately have the power to determine news coverage.

The daily practice of newspaper journalism

Journalists must respond quickly to breaking news. Whether writing an article, a column or an editorial, journalists are interested in three things: newsworthiness, relevance to their readers, and quick access to subject expertise. Within a few hours of receiving an assignment, they have to learn the content, find sources to comment on that content, and write the story. A newsworthy story is one that is out of the ordinary and that happened within the last 24 hours. This process requires immediate translation and commentary from an expert, as tomorrow the story may no longer be news.

Working with researchers

Journalists rely on the expertise of others to do their work. They partner perfectly with a special type of researcher: one who is knowledgeable, patient, able to articulate in plain language, and willing to interpret scientific developments on demand and on a regular basis. Journalists identify the ideal researcher as one who can “make the salient points clear, like a bell ringing” and tie the results into what they mean for people in their day-to-day lives. The ultimate find for journalists, according to the study, is an academic who is able to slow down and simplify his or her language so it can reach a wider public.

To bridge the communication gap between these two groups of knowledge brokers, journalists in this study urge researchers to appreciate their perspectives, take their suggestions seriously, and join with them in public conversations about important health issues. To assist in the knowledge transfer process, participants in this study offered strategies such as targeting like-minded editors, columnists and reporters with an eye to informing and influencing the public and policy makers; respecting how journalists are constrained by newsworthiness, reader relevance and daily deadlines; and being prepared to synthesize research findings and communicate these messages simply, on a continuing basis. These strategies can lead to improved journalist-researcher relationships that can encourage public dialogue and promote the use of research in policy-making.

Reference

Waddell C et al. 2005. "Joining the Conversation: Newspaper Journalists' Views on Working with Researchers." *Healthcare Policy*; 1(1): 123-136.

This summary is an interpretation and is not necessarily endorsed by the author(s) of the work cited.