

## EDITORIAL

## Research in News Media: Projection and Portrayal Matters

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In today's world, digital media have been integral parts of human life, be it for entertainment or information. Many things that come into the media quickly bring changes in day-to-day life. The impact of media though gradual and subtle has an enormous effect on economics, environment, health behavior, mentality and perception towards certain things or practices and creates change in overall human lives. Unrestrained news about medicines, therapies, food and cosmetics as well as other various commercial products spread quickly creating sensational effects that can be perceived as breakthroughs or alarming signals by the public.

Although some facts are based on the robust scientific research carried out by biomedical scientists, the gist of news reports maybe presented differently from the finding and conclusion of the studies. The research is a complex work beginning with a generation of hypothesis, data acquisition, analysis, interpretation, statistical computation and drawing of conclusion. These steps are rigorous and require meticulous exemption. The final step of the research is dissemination of findings by publication in a peer reviewed journal. Article reading requires tactful judgment and critical appraisal of the methodology and the findings. As the research article gets published in the reputed journal, news media quickly scan the report for making a piece of suitable news decorated often by a superfluous title. They need short, concise, and attractive news for the readers. The body of the article may be balanced if written by a trained journalist but mostly the first few paragraphs still direct the readers towards an alarming situation and demand over-alertness.

The news report may present the major parts from the conclusion and underestimate the numerous limitations of the study mentioned by authors in the journal articles. The published articles sometime show particular results based on mathematical calculations carried out during statistics analysis and cannot be generalized in whole population. There are different kinds of medical research papers ranging from opinions and narrative reviews to systematic reviews and each study design may have some limitations in the given context. If these limitations are underestimated, the evidence generated will be biased. For example, recent news reports have claimed aspartame is carcinogenic, potentially causing cancer in humans [1]. As per WHO guidelines consuming usual doses of aspartame may not be unsafe even though it is labeled as "possibly carcinogenic" specifically for hepatocellular carcinoma [2].

There are many such instances wherein the scientific research has been swiftly converted into news items with high-sounding words and phrases. In the context of Nepal where we lack experienced health journalists in news media, traditional reporting will definitely misreport the actual findings of the study.

## Declarations

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Seeking higher public response and obtaining more views for a particular platform plays a role to follow the 'viral' topics and news items overshadow the complete and diligent reporting. The understandability of the public is also a hindrance when reporters try to convert scientific language into a news item. Metaphorically speaking, after reading a piece of sensational news, a person uses a coin to scratch the recharge card to avoid cancer of the skin while the same person is holding a cigarette in between the other fingers.

It is thus important to seek medical advice and recommendations from experts in the concerned fields rather than following news items or similar sources of information blindly. On the other hand, the collaboration between stakeholders such as researchers, experts of research and health journalists would bring fruitful scientific news to society [3]. As for example, educational awareness has been recommended among researchers and journalists in a developing nation [4].

To minimize misinterpretation of the scientific studies, researchers should be cautious in transparent reporting of the methodology, potential confounders, biases, limitations and clinical implications. It is our duty to aware the public and let them know actual evidence available rather than developing health behavior based on news items of various digital media. There is a lack of research on how digital media have been playing their role in society in our context and thus potential and interested researchers may work in this direction to further shed light on this issue.

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