

How to do mass media publicity for a neglected disease. Lessons from Tsetse and Trypanosomiasis in Kenya

Pamela Olet and Joseph Othieno

Abstract

The prioritization of neglected diseases in the policy making framework requires heightened advocacy [WHO, 2006]. Mass media positive publicity is among approaches that can be used to achieve this. This paper discusses practical use of mass media to do publicity and advocacy for a neglected disease and its vector. It uniquely presents online links to the analyzed newspaper and television news and opinion articles on tsetse and Trypanosomiasis. The paper shares entry points into mass media advocacy from a lessons learned perspective and notes the importance of understanding how the mass media works in order to achieve advocacy of neglected diseases using sleeping sickness as a case study.

Keywords

Health communication; Science and policy-making; Communication, mass media engagement

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) lists Human African Trypanosomiasis (HAT) commonly called sleeping sickness among the 17 Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) [WHO, 2006]. Trypanosomiasis is a broad term applied in reference to the zoonotic nature of the disease which is caused by a protozoan parasite and affects man and animals [Jordan, 1979]. The NTDs are a group of parasitic and bacterial infectious diseases that thrive mostly in poor populations [WHO, 2006]. Sleeping sickness is spread through bites of infected tsetse flies and is found in 36 sub Saharan countries [WHO, 2015]. The awareness levels of the disease is low resulting in a low risk perception index among the at risk populations [Odiit et al., 2004]. The disease suspicion index among human and animal health workers is relatively low [Odiit et al., 2004; Odiit et al., 2005].

According to the Pan-African Tsetse and Eradication Campaign (PATTEC) the disease vector must be eradicated for the prevention and eventual eradication of sleeping sickness [AU-PATTEC, 2001]. The eradication of tsetse flies is a financial intensive venture that must be supported by the government. The government commitment to the eradication of tsetse flies and Trypanosomiasis require commitment at the policy level [AU-PATTEC, 2001]. The effective utilization of the mass media publicity can create awareness among lay public and lobby policy makers to prioritize and allocate resources towards eradication of Trypanosomiasis.

In the developing countries the ever increasing health needs for diverse populations against ever shrinking resource base calls for heightened advocacy to

secure support especially for neglected tropical diseases like sleeping sickness. The mass media can be a key player in such advocacy efforts through both positive and negative publicity.

Publicity is about presenting an issue to the public in a way that it gets noticed, understood and elicit appropriate actions from the targeted audience groups. This action can be a behavior change, debate, collective action or support from government and other stakeholders. When an issue is brought to the attention of the public through the mass media; the process is called mass media publicity.

The role of the mass media is to provide information, educate, entertain, socialize and change attitudes and behaviors of its audiences [Schramm, 1964; Lasswell, 1971]. The mass media is a trustworthy source of information in the developing world and many people rely on it for awareness of various issues affecting them [Schramm, 1964]. The mass media thus plays an agenda setting role through its placement of news items and therefore shapes the lay publics' understanding and decision making process. Through its portrayal of the issue, the mass media serves to raise awareness for the policy makers to take action.

The coverage of health and science issues in the mass media in the developing countries has been a subject of debate for long in the communication realms [Vincent, 2007]. Several challenges have been noted among them the lack of skills among journalists to adequately cover health and science issues and apathy among editors [Vincent, 2007].

In Kenya the highly politicized mass media further "suffocates" the coverage of neglected diseases and paints a picture similar to Vincent's assertion that coverage of health topics is normally shallow and reactive, dominated by announcement of new drugs or launch of health promotion campaigns and normally lack investigative depth [Vincent, 2007]. Neglected diseases reporting lacks depth, clarity and news angle which editors look for in a health story hence denying them a much needed mass media publicity. The overreliance on politicians for news on health issues result in negative publicity especially where politicians publicize myths around diseases at the expense of the scientific facts. Awareness creation through mass media on neglected diseases is thus a challenge that programmes working in the developing countries must plan to strategically address.

Many developing countries are faced with incessant political instability, resource limitation and subsequent inability to manage the environment, control disease transmission and ensure effective health systems [Manderson et al., 2009]. These conditions exacerbate the prevalence of neglected conditions and mass media apathy towards neglected diseases. The limited research in mass media coverage of neglected diseases in effect lowers the effectiveness of subsequent interventions [Manderson et al., 2009]. For example for effective engagement of local communities there is need for them to be understood for proper message packaging and engagement approaches that are based on scientific evidence. This is because social, cultural, economic, and political factors interact to influence individual willingness to reduce the risks of infection, transmission, recognition and treat disease [Manderson et al., 2009; Hunt, 2003].

The NTDs attract little research nationally or internationally, and virtually no investment or commercially based research and development [Manderson et al.,

2009]. This calls for urgent re-examination on awareness creation and advocacy by NTDs control and eradication programmes in Africa. The successful mobilization of US\$ 882 million by FAO, WHO and OIE for Avian Flu control and eradication in 2006 attests to the power of advocacy in disease control [FAO, ECTAD, 2013]. These global successes need to be domesticated to the African context so that the continent can lobby its leaders and international partners to collectively manage neglected diseases most of which are preventable. Advocacy for NTDs at the global level over the years has been successful but at the national level it is still a challenge [Manderson et al., 2009].

Entry points into mass media

Effective advocacy through mass media requires an understanding of the government decision making processes and the working of mass media; so as to identify strategic available entry points. Some of these entry points discussed in this article are use of policy makers as spokespersons to the mass media, government involvement in research launches, and re-alignment of programmes in line with national government priorities and regional economic blocks manifestoes and use of victim narrations. These approaches increase the news value of an article and increase its chance of being published in print mass media.

Most African constitutions recognize the right to a decent life and participatory involvement of the lay public in decision making [The Constitution of Kenya]. Most neglected diseases programmes directly implement this constitutional mandate; while this may be an entry point to anchor public debate on NTDs, most programme implementers are unaware of such constitutional backing of their undertakings. This has the effect of not calling governments to be accountable to their people and also misses a news angle that can be marketed to the mass media.

What makes news?

The mass media's chief commodity is news; thus an understanding of what translates to news is important for neglected diseases programmes. Media literacy for NTDs programme implementers should be among areas of capacity building at the initial phases of projects and programmes. The fact that NTDs affect millions but remain neglected is news! But are the implementers of these programmes aware of this as a mass media engagement facet? The science communities that ought to be credible sources for the mass media prefer publishing their work in high impact overseas journals as a key measure to their work's importance and influence [Chapman, 2001]. Scientists shun mass media publicity of their work; this is in contrast to the multiplier effect of science which is for the benefit of the multitudes.

Examples of publicity articles

The following section presents some publicity articles on tsetse and Trypanosomiasis eradication in Kenya published free of charge based on their news value. Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the principles behind successful mass media engagement for a neglected disease and its vector. The Kenya Tsetse and Trypanosomiasis Eradication Council (KENTTEC) is a government agency with a national mandate to coordinate the implementation of all tsetse and Trypanosomiasis eradication activities. The KENTTEC has a communications office whose duties among others include mass media engagement. We discuss how and why the selected articles in this paper made it to the local newspapers subsequently creating awareness and advocacy for Trypanosomiasis.

Effective utilization of the mass media is hinged on understanding the news environment within which the mass media works. The use of senior government officials in commissioning of field events was used to increase the news value of the statements given on Trypanosomiasis as this is normally viewed by the mass media as the government's commitment. The government officials were also guided by the communications office and the technical staff to write timely opinion articles and commentaries for publication in daily newspapers.

The following are two opinion articles by our former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development and the Kenya Tsetse and Trypanosomiasis Eradication Council (KENTTEC) CEO respectively "We're rid of rinderpest; now for the tsetse fly" [Lusaka, 2010] and "Like polio, Ebola was once a neglected disease" [Olet, 2015]. These two articles were published based on their newsworthiness at that particular time. The article by the Permanent Secretary was sent to the Daily Nation newspaper a day before the national ceremony to declare Kenya free from rinderpest disease after a long global eradication campaign. The occasion was presided over by the president of the Republic of Kenya and the opinion article was published on the very day and conveniently included in the presidential speech. The second opinion article by the KENTTEC CEO was written and sent to the star Newspaper at a time when the globe was fighting an Ebola outbreak that was threatening to turn into a pandemic.

The newsworthiness of the published articles was improved by the expert source and their linkage to ongoing national and global events. The use of expert sources, models and opinion leaders as champions for neglected diseases is an entry point into the mass media that has also been used in a number of articles on tsetse and Trypanosomiasis [Olet, 2010; Olet, 2009; Olwenya, 2009]. The use of experts enhances source credibility which is a critical component in effective communication as it increases the persuasiveness of the message.

This article entitled "Bid to rid Africa of sleeping sickness" [Lime, 2010] is an example of how victims of neglected diseases can be used to create publicity through mass media. In this article the journalist interviewed a recovered sleeping sickness victim who tells her own story. She talks about the negative effects of tsetse flies and how it affected her together with the family. She also dispels the myths around the disease during the interview. Upon its publication it attracted a lot of online views on the problem of sleeping sickness and was among the most read articles on the newspaper's website on that day. She is KENTTEC's ambassador and we collaborate with her in awareness.

The use of fear appeals in behavior change communication has been used for a long time and is derived from the Fear Appeals Theory which states that fear motivates individuals to take action to reduce their apprehensions about health issues [Rogers and Mewborn, 1976]. This approach has been effectively used by FAO, WHO and OIE to do global advocacy on avian influenza [FAO/WHO, 2004; WHO, 2004; FAO, ECTAD, 2013]. The following are headlines of news articles for field activities where fear appeal was used to capture the mass media attention on tsetse and Trypanosomiasis problem in Kenya — "Body warns over tsetse flies threat [Sum, 2014]" "a million people at risk of sleeping sickness experts say" [Chepkwony Cherotich, 2014]. Ethical issues must be put into consideration when applying fears

appeals to create news especially where high fear appeals are being used. In our case we used low fear appeals to create news in order to avoid being alarmist.

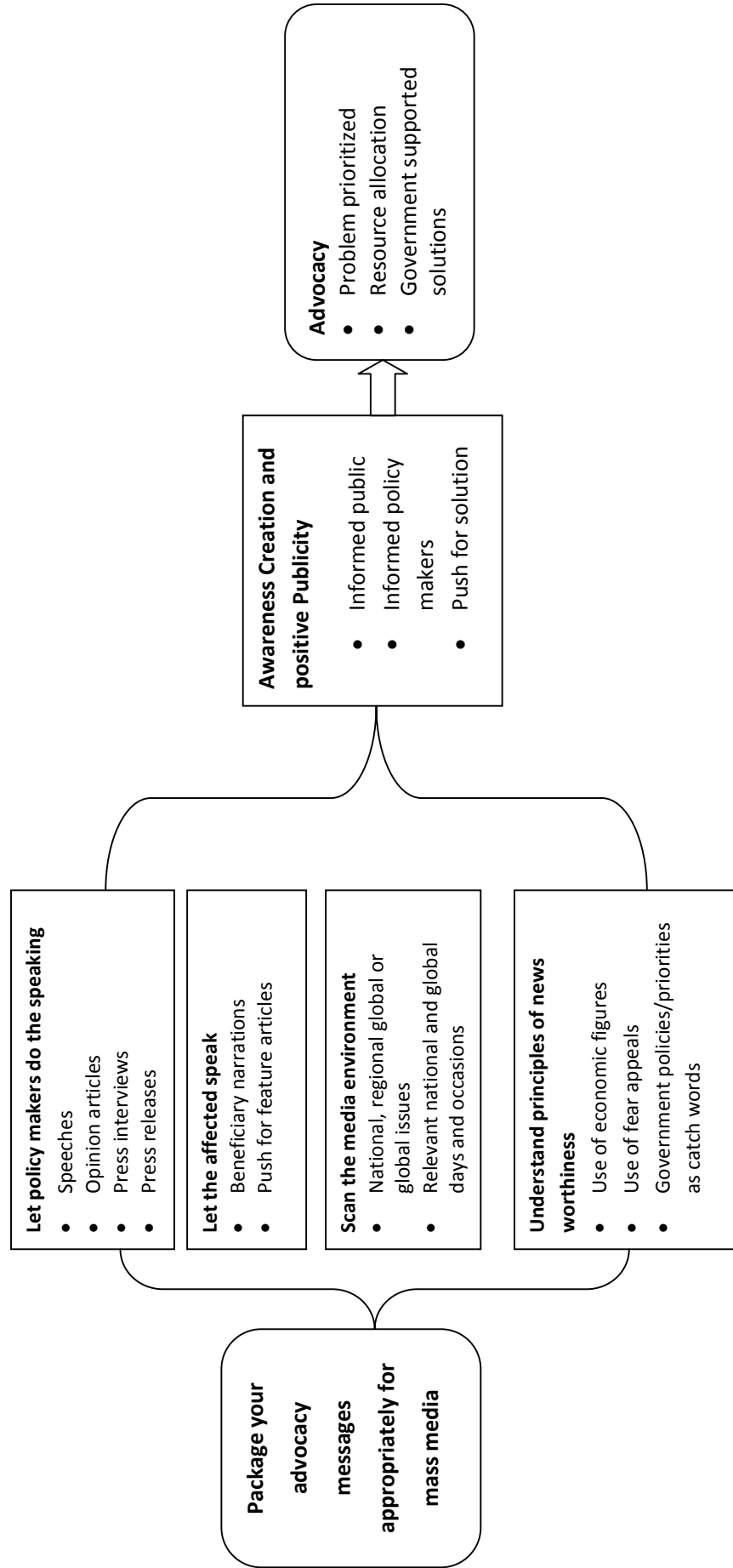
The economic burden of neglected diseases is a selling point that can be exploited to create publicity. Telling the story of neglected tsetse and Trypanosomiasis problem using monetary figures doesn't only resonate well with policy makers but also attracts the mass media. Policy makers understand economic language and understand the monetary value to a problem. The following stories made headlines by employing this tactic — "Sh705m to fight tsetse fly menace" [Senelwa, 2009], "State needs 12 billion to eradicate sleeping sickness" [Chepkwony, 2014], "A million people at risk of sleeping sickness says experts" [Chepkwony Cherotich, 2014], "Embu reaps big from Tsetse fly eradication efforts" [NTV, 2012]. These figures were included in the speeches that were read by government officials during various field activities organized by KENTTEC and subsequently picked by the journalists. Being in line with government political development goals offers an opportunity to get an issue covered by the mass media. Government policies are picked up by the mass media and make it to the public agenda because of their news value [McCombs and Shaw, 1972]. This approach is not only effective at mass media publicity but it is also an advocacy effort as your organization can show its support to the overall government manifesto. In KENTTEC for example when the Kenyan government announced the use of National Youth Service graduates in vector control we quickly used this opportunity to educate the government and the public on the urgent need to eradicate tsetse flies [Omollo, 2014; NTV, 2014]. This publicity got the president talking about the tsetse problem and subsequently setting aside funds for the vector control in selected areas. This approach is applicable in highly politicized systems where government support is pegged on political mileage to be gained by those in power which is the case in most developing countries.

Being misquoted is a common feature in science and health journalism. In our experience with the mass media this has happened severally but this example will suffice "Livestock get a jab to protect them from tsetse fly diseases" [Chacha, 2014]. However this shouldn't be given as an excuse not to involve the mass media in advocacy activity but should be viewed as a challenge that needs to be addressed through capacity building of journalists and as the reason for establishing a good rapport that facilitates open and interactive communication.

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of our lessons learned in mass media publicity for a neglected disease and its vector.

Conclusion

Effective engagement of the mass media is important in creating awareness on neglected diseases for the general lay public and policy makers. Good understanding of how the mass media assigns news value to an issue and timing are main success factors in getting mass media publicity. Figure 1 presents key approaches in engaging the mass media for advocacy. There is need for more practical experiences to match the theoretical literature on mass media advocacy for neglected diseases through publication of various field experiences. Such publications can be used in future to train journalist on how to report on neglected diseases and the neglected diseases eradication programmes implementers on how to engage the mass media for publicity and advocacy.



NB. This diagram is a summary of the approaches that can be used in doing mass media advocacy for a neglected disease and its vectors. The experience given here is from a state owned agency but can also be applied in NGOs dealing with neglected diseases to carry out mass media advocacy.

Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the lessons learned from Kenya on advocacy for a neglected disease and its vector.

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Authors

Dr. Pamela Olet is the Chief Executive Officer Kenya Tsetse and Trypanosomiasis Eradication Council (KENTTEC). E-mail: p.olet@kenttec.or.ke.

Dr. Othieno Joseph is the Officer in charge of communications at KENTTEC; he holds a bachelors degree in Veterinary Medicine, a Masters degree in Communication Studies and a PhD in Agricultural Information and Communication Management all from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. E-mail: jothieno43@yahoo.com.

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