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Media and the coverage of psychiatry

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Abstract

Background and aim

Psychiatric issues have often been a focus for the media. Studies have differed in their findings about how the subject matter is portrayed in newspapers.

We compared tone and content of Irish print with the British, broadsheets and tabloids, and the coverage of physical and mental illness.

Methods

A selection of Irish and British broadsheet and tabloid newspapers were examined page by page by researchers for period of 6 months. Various parameters investigated including who the authors were, commenting on the tone, focus and topic of the articles. A comparison of the parameters between the two countries was made.

Results

The total numbers of newspapers studied in six months were 579. In comparison the tone of heading and article was neutral for both Irish and English articles. The tone was more negative (and sensationist) on tabloids compared to dailies and Sunday newspapers. Predominantly for articles related to mental and physical illnesses tone of headline and article itself was neutral in daily and Sunday broadsheets and dramatic in daily tabloids.

Conclusions

To ensure accuracy of information and a more balanced article, we feel more articles should be written by health care professionals themselves, especially for tabloids. Databases now exist where journalists can contact the health care professionals for various illnesses.

Declarations in interest: None

Keywords: Media, newspapers, tabloids, broadsheets, stigma, physical health, mental health, Ireland, England.

Background

More than any other branch of medicine, psychiatry has become the focus of factual and fictional representations in the media and the arts. Many aspects of psychological theories have been adopted into media studies courses (1). For many years there has been concern at the portrayal of psychiatry in the media,

with even words like “schizophrenia” being used as a “metaphor”(2). In one Italian newspaper study use of word “schizophrenia” was used to describe incoherence/contradiction/split (85%), dangerousness/aggressiveness (4.4%) and eccentricity/oddness (10.5%) times than the diagnosis itself (3). The print media is of particular interest to psychiatrists wishing to address issues such as public information, misinformation and stigma since this medium is a greater source of health related information than its electronic counterpart (3) and because there is a relationship between public opinion and media images (4) with obvious implications for attitudes to psychiatry. The negative portrayal of psychiatry in newspapers has been confirmed by some studies (5, 6) which have shown that the image of psychiatry and psychiatric patients has either deteriorated or remained the same with some minor cosmetic changes e.g. appropriate headlines, increasing use of direct quotes from psychiatric experts over time (7, 8). One of the major concerns has been the large focus on forensic issues (9, 10) and that articles of interest rarely receive front page coverage except when the content relates to legal aspects of psychiatry (11), often sensational in tone. In particular there has been concern within the profession at the use and understanding of the psychiatric diagnosis and terms used in the media and especially the tone of some headlines in the British press such as “Hospital Bungle Released Beast for Sex Spree” or in the Irish press “Boy, 12 facing Mental Prison”.

By contrast, other studies have failed to substantiate the view that psychiatry is portrayed negatively (12, 13) and found that among Irish newspapers most articles were either supportive or neutral in the tone of coverage, revealing a more positive approach than is evident in other countries. A study conducted in United States noticed a decrease in crime reporting committed by people with schizophrenia in 2010 as compared with 2000 but no difference was found in metaphorical use of the terms “schizophrenia” over ten years (15).

Some Irish media presenters, such as Vincent Brown (16) have claimed that the blame does not rest solely at the door of the media, pointing to the poor services for many patients and shifted the focus to psychiatrists themselves by calling for more active involvement with the media, so that working together the negative images and stereotypes directed at psychiatric “patients” can be overcome.

However the negative coverage has not only been directed at psychiatric illnesses but physical illnesses were also treated in the same manner although the focus was slightly different (17) with negative commentary criticising doctors while those covering psychiatry tended to criticise patients. In 1999 the Irish Division of Psychiatry, launched a campaign titled “Changing minds” (18) (2000) in response to these criticisms. Its aim was to change some of the negative stereotypes of psychiatric illnesses that exist by active participation with the media. It also launched a press guide backed by the National Union of Journalists for reporting on schizophrenia (19). The World Psychiatric

Association launched a global programme “Open the Doors” to reduce stigma and discrimination because of schizophrenia in collaboration with the media (20).

The present study represents an extension of two earlier investigations (13, 21) into the coverage of psychiatry in Irish newspapers. There is also a comparison with the British print media. The method in the present study is expanded to include all sections of the newspaper including the letters page and sports pages as well as identifying references to psychiatry in unrelated articles e.g. mention of exercise to reduce depression.

Hypothesis

The hypotheses are that

- a) Irish print coverage is no different in tone from that in other countries such as Britain
- b) There is a difference between broadsheet or tabloid newspapers in the frequency and tone of coverage of psychiatric issues with broadsheets faring better.
- c) That the coverage of physical illness is more favourable than that of mental illness

Methods

A selection of Irish broadsheet and tabloid newspapers were examined page by page by researchers for period of 6 months as described below.

Two daily broadsheets including **Irish Times** and **Irish Independent**, three Sunday broadsheets including **Sunday Business post**, **Sunday Independent** and **Sunday Tribune** and one daily tabloid **The Irish Sun** were chosen to be included in the study. These are the newspapers, which were used, in the previous study and using the same will reduce bias and also it will be possible to assess if there is any improvement overtime as compared to the previous study (13).

To compare with the British print media daily broadsheets/Sunday newspapers included, these were **The Mail/Mail on Sunday**, **The Times/Sunday Times**, **The Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph** and **The Mirror/Sunday Mirror**.

To avoid bias we used the same time period and also the same months of the year as the previous study. We examined newspapers from 1st July to 31st December 2008.

Each newspaper was scanned for articles directly relevant to psychiatry or psychiatric patients as well as general pieces that mentioned psychiatry in the text. In addition headlines in which psychiatric terms e.g. obsessed schizophrenic etc. used were also included. All sections of the newspaper were examined

including the letters page, sports column pages and supplements. The items (articles, references and headlines) were examined for the following attributes:

Item type (news, feature, letter)

Subject of item (forensic, psychiatric services etc)

Profession of author (Health professional, journalist (general, medical correspondent), not given.

Whether opinion of mental health professional sought.

Tone of headline [Positive, neutral, critical, judgemental, sensational (dramatic, factual)]

Tone of article [Positive, neutral, critical, judgemental, sensational (dramatic, factual)]

Page of item.

Presence of a photograph (other than of the writer)

Gender of writer.

Focus (patients, illness, service provider, therapist, services)

Topic (Medicine, services, patients, general information)

The same attributes as above were used for the physical illnesses and on the basis it was examined if their coverage is any different than the mental illness.

Definitions: Mental health professional is defined as psychiatrists, psychologists, nurse or any person working in the mental health services on a professional basis. The tone of an article is defined as critical if it is negative but reasons for the criticism are provided and/or alternative suggested. Judgemental articles on the other hand are those that simply contained negative portrayals with no alternative suggested. The tone of sensational articles is dramatic and/or not factually based.

Results

The total numbers of newspapers studied in six months were 579. In total 357 articles/references to psychiatry and 746 articles/references to other medical conditions in Ireland were identified in the six months under study. This represents a mean of 0.61 items per paper, per day for psychiatry and 1.29 items per paper per day for other medical conditions. The different types of articles in newspapers can be seen in table 1 and 2.

Table 1 .Category of articles by type of newspaper for mental health.

Article type	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid(daily)	Broadsheet(Sunday)
News	64.1% (143)	56.9% (29)	54.2% (45)
Features	26.5% (59)	29.4% (15)	38.6% (32)

Letters	9.4% (21)	13.7% (7)	7.2% (6)
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Table 2. Category of article by type of newspaper for other medical conditions.

Article type	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid(daily)	Broadsheet(Sunday)
News	76.7% (376)	73.0% (81)	56.6% (82)
Features	18.0% (88)	24.3% (27)	37.2% (54)
Letters	5.3% (26)	2.7% (3)	6.2% (9)

Eight percent of articles relating to mental health/illness were published on the front page of the daily broadsheets and slightly more in the Sunday papers while around 12% appeared on the front page of the tabloid. Overall the number of articles on the front page was 9% for mental health/illness and 11% for other medical conditions.

In total 12.0%(43) articles were written by health professionals, 64.1%(229) articles by general journalists, 10.9%(39) articles by medical correspondents who are not health professionals, and in 12.9%(46) articles author was not mentioned (Chi^2 18.77, df 6, p 0.004) for psychiatry. For physical (medical) articles, in total 5.8%(43) articles were written by health professionals, 56.6% (422) by general journalists, 27.9%(208) by medical correspondents and in 9.8% (73) articles author was not mentioned (Chi^2 201.75,df6 p 0.004).This comparison can also be seen in table 3 and 4.

Table 3. Profession of author for psychiatry related articles.

Author	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid(daily)	Broadsheet(Sunday)
Health professional	15.1% (34)	0.0% (0)	10.7% (9)
General journalist	59.6% (134)	87.5% (42)	63.1% (53)
Medical journalist	12.9% (29)	0.0% (0)	11.9% (10)
Not given	12.4% (28)	12.5% (6)	14.3% (12)

Table 4. Profession of author for articles related to other medical conditions.

Author	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid (daily)	Broadsheet (Sunday)
Health professional	6.1% (30)	5.4% (6)	4.8% (7)
General journalist	47.3% (232)	56.8% (63)	87.6% (127)
Medical journalist	40.6% (199)	2.7% (3)	4.1% (6)
Not given	5.9% (29)	35.1% (39)	3.4% (5)

In comparison health professionals wrote more articles in Irish broadsheets than English broadsheets. Majority of the articles both in Irish and English papers about psychiatry related issues were written by general journalists as seen in table 5.

Table 5. Comparison between authors in Irish and English Broadsheets regarding Psychiatry.

Author	Irish Broadsheets	English Broadsheet
Health professional	15.1% (34)	5.8% (4)
General journalist	59.6% (134)	49.3% (34)
Medical journalist	12.9% (29)	13.0% (9)

Not given	12.4% (28)	31.9% (22)
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In total 12.9%(38) articles were written by health professionals, 57.1%(168) articles by general journalists, 12.9%(38) articles by medical correspondents who are not health professionals, and in 17.0%(50) articles author was not mentioned (Chi² 16.25, df 3, p 0.0010).

In 56.9 % (203) articles opinion of medical professional regarding psychiatric conditions was obtained. The daily and Sunday broadsheets were significantly more likely to seek the opinion of a mental health professional (63.2% and 54.2% respectively) in contrast to 33.3% in the tabloid newspapers. (Chi² 15.43, df 2, p 0.000). For other medical conditions in 72.4% (540) articles opinion of medical professional was obtained. Similarly daily and Sunday broadsheets were significantly more likely to seek the opinion of a professional (76.5%and 70.3% respectively) in contrast to 56.8% in the tabloid newspapers (Chi² 18.07, df 2, p 0.000).

When comparing with English papers, opinion of medical professional was obtained slightly more commonly for Irish articles, 63.2% than English, 60.9% (Chi^2 0.0448, df 1, p 0.8324). Overall 62.7% articles obtained opinion from a medical professional.

Use of photographs other than of the author was least common in the daily broadsheets as compared to the tabloids and Sunday broadsheets for both psychiatry related articles and other medical conditions.

For psychiatric conditions overall 43.1% (154) article authors were male, 45.1% (161) articles by females and 11.8% (42) articles by both or it was not mentioned. In comparison for other medical conditions 32.1% (240) article authors were male, 57.0% (426) articles by females and 11.0% (82) articles by both or it was not mentioned.

Predominantly for articles related to mental illnesses tone of *heading* was neutral in daily and Sunday broadsheets and dramatic in daily tabloids, (Chi^2 37.8, df 6, p 0.000) and the result was statistically significant for tabloid (Z = -2.95 for neutral heading and 4.29 for dramatic heading). The tone of *article* was neutral for broadsheets and dramatic for tabloids (Chi^2 26.8, df 6, p 0.000) Z = -2.90) for neutral article and (Z = 3.43) for dramatic articles in tabloids. Overall 35.85% (128) articles had neutral headlines and this can be seen in tables 6 and 7. Z

values > 1.96 are significant. Positive value mean the observed value is greater than the expected value.

Table 6. Predominant tone of headline by newspaper type.

Tone of Heading	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid(daily)	Broadsheet(Sunday)
Positive	12.6% (28)	15.4% (8)	14.5% (12)
Neutral	41.7% (93)	11.5% (6)	34.9% (29)
Critical	15.2% (34)	5.8% (3)	20.5% (17)
Judgemental	1.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	6.0% (5)
Dramatic	24.7% (55)	61.5% (32)	20.5% (17)
Factual	4.0% (9)	5.8% (3)	3.6% (3)

Table 7. Predominant tone of article by newspaper type.

Tone of articles	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid(daily)	Broadsheet(Sunday)
Positive	15.7% (35)	17.6% (9)	10.8% (9)
Neutral	38.1% (85)	11.8% (6)	44.6% (37)
Critical	22.0% (49)	23.5% (12)	25.3% (21)

Judgemental	0.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	3.6% (3)
Dramatic	17.5% (39)	41.2% (21)	12.0% (10)
Factual	5.8% (13)	5.9% (3)	3.6% (3)

For articles related to other medical conditions tone of heading was neutral in daily and Sunday broadsheets and dramatic in daily tabloids (χ^2 62.0, df 8 p 0.000) and the result was statistically significant ($Z = -3.51$) for neutral headings and ($Z = 5.74$) for dramatic headings in tabloids, whereas tone of article was critical in daily and Sunday broadsheets and dramatic in daily tabloids (χ^2 65.6, df 8 p 0.00). Overall 28.28% (211) articles had neutral headlines and almost 26% had critical headlines. During this time the cancer services in Ireland were criticised a lot, so the content of most articles was critical in broadsheets.

Table 8. Predominant tone of heading by newspaper type.

Tone of Heading	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid (daily)	Broadsheet (Sunday)
Positive	17.6% (86)	13.5% (15)	14.5% (21)
Neutral	31.0% (152)	10.8% (12)	32.4% (47)
Critical	25.5% (125)	21.6% (24)	31.7% (46)
Judgemental	1.0% (5)	0.0% (0)	2.8% (4)

Dramatic	20.0% (98)	51.4% (57)	17.2% (25)
Factual	4.9% (24)	2.7% (3)	1.4% (2)

Table 9. Predominant tone of article by newspaper type.

Tone of articles	Broadsheet (daily)	Tabloid (daily)	Broadsheet (Sunday)
Positive	15.7% (77)	13.5% (15)	13.1% (19)
Neutral	29.6% (145)	10.8% (12)	35.2% (51)
Critical	32.4% (159)	27.0% (30)	36.6% (53)
Judgemental	0.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	1.4% (2)
Dramatic	14.7% (72)	43.2% (48)	11.0% (16)
Factual	6.7% (33)	5.4% (6)	2.8% (4)

In comparison the tone of heading and article was neutral for both Irish and English articles. Irish newspapers had more dramatic headings than the English papers which had slightly more positive headings. (Chi^2 42.78, df 5, p 0.00049). Irish newspapers gave more factual information than English papers. (Chi^2 48.11, df 5, p 0.000499).

A range of topics were covered of which general articles relating to psychiatric illness/treatment were the most common. Articles about the general information were more common in the daily broadsheets, 22.1% (79) articles focused on the

patients, 53.5% (191) articles were about the illness itself, and 15.1% (54) articles focused on the services provided to the patients.

For other medical conditions general articles relating to medical services were the most common in broadsheets whereas articles about medicines/illness were more common in the daily tabloids (Chi^2 41.50, df6 p 0.000). 22.5% (168) articles focused on the patients, 37.4% (279) articles were about the illness itself, and 32.2% (240) articles focused on the services provided to the patients (Chi^2 15.03, df8 p 0.058)

Articles regarding illness and treatment were more common in Irish papers, whereas services were more a topic in English papers (Chi^2 38.95, df 3, p 0.000497). 25.6% (75) articles focused on the patients, 51.2% (150) articles were about the illness itself, and 13.7% (40) articles focused on the services provided to the patients.

Conclusions

News items were the most common type of articles in the daily broadsheets and in the tabloids, 60.78% (217) for psychiatric conditions and 72.3% (539) for other medical conditions and both had a similar pattern in relation to features and letters, while features predominated in the Sunday papers. These findings are very similar to the one in the previous study (13). In the English newspapers the

pattern was similar in psychiatry but there was an increased focus on the features (43.47%) than the Irish papers (26.45%).

We noted with interest that only a fraction of the articles published about psychiatric (and medical) issues was written by a health professional. Had they done so, perhaps more of the articles would have been factual and more measured in tone (and less sensationalist and dramatic). Certainly organisations such as the Science Media Centre (www.sciencemediacentre.org) are trying to encourage more health care professionals to be placed on a database so that journalists can contact them when a story that is related to their field of expertise is required. Their aim is to provide 'accurate and evidence-based information about science and engineering through the media, particularly on controversial and headline news stories when most confusion and misinformation occurs' (24). There is also a similar database held by the Medical Journalists Association (25).

Regarding the hypotheses we found that Irish print coverage is no different in tone from that in Britain. As expected, we found a difference between broadsheet or tabloid newspapers in the tone of coverage of psychiatric issues with broadsheets faring better. We however did not find the coverage of physical illness is more favourable than that of mental illness. Many of the articles read about physical health stories were about doctors misdiagnosing a medical condition (such as meningitis) and was often critical about the care and services received. In contrast, some of the articles about mental illness depicted a personal journey of someone affected and how psychiatrists, and services had helped, and was therefore positive in nature.

The limitations to the study are that 6 months of the year were studied, and the results may be skewed by one large story that was written frequently in the press. It would be preferable to repeat the study over a longer period of time. Also 2 different researchers were involved in reading the articles, one for the Irish print, and one for the British print. As there is a degree of subjectivity involved in making judgements about the tone of the article, this could have varied between the 2 researchers. However attempts were made to minimise this by defining the parameters as clearly as possible.

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