Fit to Print: A Natural History of Obesity
Research in the Canadian News Media

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Abstract: This natural-history approach to investigating media reports concerning health can reveal the complex process whereby health research becomes news. Using television and newspaper reports of a press event taken from a larger project, this article examines the inception and mediation of obesity research in the Canadian news media. By exploring questionnaire data, a media release, telephone interviews with journalists, and news reports, we can better understand the meaning making that occurs at all levels in the communications process. We conclude that there is an interdependent and possibly problematic relationship between health sources and journalists that shapes the inception and mediation of obesity research and the translation of health research to the public.

Keywords: Cultural studies; Media/mass media; Newspapers

Résumé : Cette approche, qui a recours à l’histoire naturelle pour investiguer les reportages sur la santé, peut révéler le processus complexe selon lequel la recherche dans le domaine de la santé devient une nouvelle. En utilisant des reportages de télévision et de journaux sur un événement de presse provenant d’un plus grand projet, cet article examine l’origine et la médiation de la recherche sur l’obésité dans les médias canadiens. Au moyen de données de questionnaire, d’un communiqué de presse, d’entrevues téléphoniques avec des journalistes et de rapports de nouvelles, nous pouvons mieux comprendre la création de sens qui a lieu à tous les niveaux du processus de communication. Nous concluons qu’il y a un rapport d’interdépendance peut-être problématique entre les experts en santé et les journalistes qui influence l’orientation et la médiation de la recherche sur l’obésité et la présentation au public de la recherche dans le domaine de la santé.

Mots clés : études culturelles; médias de masse; journaux

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For many people, the media is their main source of information about health. How health research comes to the attention of and is processed by the media are important questions that have been neglected in the studies of health reporting in the news. Much of the research on mediated health communication focuses on texts to assess if they promote or discourage health and healthy activity or it examines the social understandings created by the media (Kline, 2006). Often, the media is seen as operating in “splendid isolation” whereby health messages are believed to have direct attitudinal and behavioural effects on the audience rather than being one of many forces which shape audience’s behaviours and attitudes (Tones & Tilford, 1994, p.180). Typically, these appraisals of health communication in media focus on areas such as the dissemination of specific messages, the behavioural effect of messages, and/or the recall of particular media items by the general public (for a review see Finlay & Faulkner, 2005). Concerns about the adequacy, accuracy, and reach of health messages predominate, ignoring the socially constructed nature of news messages (Malone, Boyd, & Bero, 2000) and other theoretical developments that have occurred in media studies (Seale, 2003; Winett & Wallack, 1996).

The media does not transmit information in a vacuum; instead it selects, combines, and presents events in the real world and it therefore constructs versions of reality that can shape our understandings of health and illness (Lupton, 1999). In this article, we present an approach to examining health research in the media that contributes to an understanding of the process of meaning making that occurs within the stages of creating news about health. We begin by discussing a natural history approach to media analysis, which takes into account the processes of inception and mediation and their overlapping impact on the creation of knowledge and meaning. We believe that the study of health in the media—in this case represented by research about physical activity and obesity—would benefit from an approach that examines different phases of the communication process to explore their “mutual implications and interpenetration” (Fenton, Bryman, & Deacon, 1998, p.143). In what follows, we present a study of the way that a health advocacy group’s media release was reported in the Canadian news media. We examine how both sources and journalists contribute to what appears in print and television news, including the ways each group and the media texts themselves frame the issues of childhood obesity and health research. In particular, we are interested in critically examining the nature of the relationship between health sources who wish to promote their research findings and the journalists who are looking for news to report, and how this relationship shapes the inception and mediation of obesity research and the translation of this knowledge to the public.

**Obesity in the News Media**

Media reporting on obesity as a health concern has become ubiquitous in the last several years. Reporting on this issue in U.S. newspapers has increased from less than 100 articles in 1985 to over 1,200 articles in 2003 (Lawrence, 2004). Given the growing incidence of media reports about obesity, there remains a paucity of research examining news media representations (Boyce, 2007) and their inception and production. Instead, the main focus of these reports has been examining the effects of mass media and the entertainment industry (e.g. video games), often...
blaming them for the increase in obesity rates, particularly in children (for a review see Kline, 2005). Not only has the relationship between media use and weight been questioned (Boyce, 2007; Marshall, Biddle, Gorely, Cameron, & Murdey, 2004), but studies that chastise the media demonstrate a limited understanding of media effects and audience research (Finlay & Faulkner, 2005; Seale, 2003).

While we have not encountered studies that specifically examine the media dissemination of obesity research, some examinations of media reporting are available. Lawrence (2004) assesses the media’s framing of responsibility for obesity from 1985 and finds that there continues to be a vigorous debate about whether individual characteristics/behaviours or social environments contribute most to increases in obesity rates. A recent news framing study similarly reported that mentions of personal causes and solutions of obesity in the U.S. media significantly outnumbered societal attributions of responsibility, although mentions of societal causes and solutions were increasing (Kim & Willis, 2007). Other socio-cultural accounts find that the media represents obesity as an unequivocal fact despite few certainties in the primary scientific research on obesity (Gard & Wright, 2005). These accounts contest the notion of an “obesity epidemic,” asserting that the promotion of certainty in the media through a reliance on mostly biomedical/scientific narratives neglects the social questions of how Western society views fatness as a moral failing. This can generate anxieties about the body and promote weight loss/thinness as the ultimate goal instead of the health promotion practice of focusing on healthy lifestyles (Rich & Evans, 2005). These accounts demonstrate that social understandings about the prevalence of obesity and its health effects remain contested, at least in the academic sphere. This research also remains focused on media texts and does not examine the role of production in media communication (Deacon, 2003).

Natural Histories of Health in the Media

Some recent studies of health in the mass media have moved away from a sole focus on texts towards a fuller consideration of the inception, production, and framing of these media reports. For example, Mebane, Temin, & Parvanta (2003) examine the Centers for Disease Control’s (CDC) and the media’s communication of information regarding “a web of anthrax exposures” in 2001 (p. 51). While this study acknowledged the CDC’s role in the communication process, the focus remains mainly on issues of adequacy and accuracy concerning how much and how well the CDC’s messages were transmitted to the public. Lofstedt’s (2003) examination of how source organizations promoted their research findings about a possible link between acrylamide in fried foods and cancer, moves beyond assessing the congruence between source messages and media reporting by examining the effects of particular media relations strategies in terms of what was reported and public reaction to a health scare. This examination of the science communication process provides some insight into the role of sources and journalists in shaping what is reported in the press. It also focuses on improving health risk communication by presenting strategies which may encourage the successful transmission of an organization’s health message. Here again, the focus is on ensuring the public receives correct information rather than on asking how meaning is created in the process of mediated health communication.
Analyses like these represent an emerging recognition of the importance of using a media studies approach to examinations of health stories in the news media and can add new information to the health and media literature. Specifically, this article adopts a ‘social constructivist’ approach to media research that requires deconstruction of the media processes, products, and audiences to examine their power relationships and contributions to constructing a media message that occurs at each level of inception, mediation, and ultimately consumption (Alasuutari, 1999). By considering the roles of health organizations, sources, and journalists, we can begin to examine the media using an approach that avoids examining these processes discretely and in competition with each other and instead positions them as “different moments in the process of communication” (Fenton et al., 1998, p.143). This natural history approach views media texts as emerging from a process that is made up of different stages, which are both direct and continuous including inception, production, and mediation (Finlay & Faulkner, 2005; Finlay, Roy, & Faulkner, 2006). This moves away from a predominant focus on representation studies (e.g., Berry, Wharf-Higgins, & Naylor, 2007; Collins, Abelson, Pyman, & Lavis, 2006; Hayes, Ross, Gasher, Gutstein, Dunn & Hackett, 2007) as recent and informative examples in the Canadian context to a broader insight into how what we read becomes news.

The inception of the message occurs before the media reports even exist. It encompasses the creation of such things as health campaigns, communication plans, media strategies, and the work of media relations experts, marketing companies, and health agencies who actively build the messages they want communicated through the media. This process of “encoding” (Hall, 1980) suggests that “cultural producers consciously or unconsciously instill meaning into cultural products” (Strinati, 1995, p.127) and are actively involved in defining the meanings of health messages. A second process of encoding occurs within the production of the message by the media and involves examining the content of the message itself, including the social understandings of health which are created in the media texts. Here, there is debate regarding the extent to which the media simply reflects frameworks and structures asserted by others or “project their own thematic spins onto the public consciousness” (Terkildsen, Schell, & Ling, 1998, p.45). Detailed analyses of the role of sources and journalists in the construction of a news item also provides insight into the discursive struggles, or “the socially-shared news values, ideologies, and goals... that underlie the production of news” (van Dijk, 1988, p.96). Lastly, our examination of the news text considers not only the reach of the media, but also the impact media outlets have on the meaning of the message to determine the amount of coverage generated by a media release, any differences in coverage based on medium or location and how the media defines the story for consumers (Deacon, Fenton, & Bryman, 1999; Fenton et al., 1998; Finlay & Faulkner, 2005). Mediation does not refer to audience consumption practices, nor does it presume audience reactions to these messages and it avoids the inoculation theories common in public health social marketing approaches to mediated health communication.

Any study considering the construction of media texts is in part assessing their “newsworthiness” or the news values that make them attractive for publi-
cation. Fuller (1996) suggests that news values are the criteria by which journalists and editors make judgements on the newsworthiness of a story. News values vary depending on the media outlet and the style of reporting, and may also conflict with those of the organization attempting to get its message across. For health stories, elements such as novelty, celebrity, controversy, locality, human interest, community relevance, and timeliness are all established news values (Chapman, 2004; Lantz & Booth, 1998; Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, & Thembba-Nixon, 1993). Assessing the values that are prominent in messages provides insight into the media’s priorities in reporting on health research (Peterson, 1998). The ability to decipher the news values of the media outlets that health organizations wish to target can ultimately help in publicizing research initiatives and health promotion messages in the future (Lofstedt, 2003). Regarding obesity health research in the Canadian media, the examination of all these processes together has not been undertaken and relatively few studies have attempted to track the impact of specific news source campaigns through the process of news encoding (Manning, 2001). This case study provides an example of such a natural history approach to explore the socially constructed nature of mediated messages.

**Method**

In a Canadian news landscape where health stories are overwhelmingly about health care (Hayes, et al., 2007), this article focuses on the reporting of a Canadian research study that measured the effectiveness of a program to reduce childhood obesity. This story was identified during the course of our larger research project examining media reports about physical activity and obesity in the Canadian news media from November 2004 to April 2005 (print, n=1542, television, n=90). For the larger project, stories classified as reports about Canadian physical activity or obesity research were selected for further analysis including a content analysis (Faulkner, Roy, & Finlay, 2007) and research with sources (n=19) and journalists (n=14) to investigate the processes of production (Finlay, Roy, & Faulkner, 2006). The content analysis also led to the identification of health organizations that were prominent in the news media in order to initiate further research into the natural histories of their news reports.

The story discussed here was chosen because it received good coverage; it appeared in nine of the 15 media sources in our sample (six newspaper articles and three television broadcasts). It also satisfied pragmatic concerns; information about the story’s inception and production were available to the researchers in the forms of interviews, questionnaires, and supplementary texts. Eight journalists who reported on this story were contacted and asked to participate in a telephone interview with the lead author about their role in the production of the news article and invited to comment on the role of the news media in promoting physical activity and health. Four agreed to be interviewed. Also, the two sources that were named in the physical activity research media reports were sent a questionnaire asking them about their experience and perceptions of the media both relating to this instance and more generally; both questionnaires were completed and returned. Finally, printed materials from the source organizations, including the academic journal article (Veugelers & Fitzgerald, 2005) and the press release, were examined (CIHI, 2005).
The natural history of this news story is composed of four parts: 1) A summary of our content analysis of the physical activity and obesity research articles to contextualize the news reports examined here. 2) An analysis of the processes of inception through an investigation of the media release and sources’ responses. 3) An exploration of journalists’ professional practices and their conceptions of newsworthiness, which influence the production process as journalists translate the materials provided by the source organizations into news. 4) An examination of the reports from both television and newspapers to expand upon how the media framed this story for the audience.

Context: Physical Activity and Obesity Research in the Canadian News Media

Stories about obesity and physical activity appear to be frequently reported in the Canadian news media (for a comparison to U.S. reports see IFIC, 2007). Our media tracking of articles relating to physical activity and obesity between November 2004 and April 2005 garnered a total of 1,542 news reports. Of these, 270 (17.4%) were identified as reporting on research. More specifically, 151 discussed obesity only, 45 detailed research relating to both obesity and physical activity, and 74 reported solely on physical activity research.

The 151 reports on obesity research encompassed 98 different stories; the majority of which were reported on one or two times. A small minority of stories (12) were reported in most or all of the eleven newspapers in our sample. The main focus of the majority (30.6%) of stories examining obesity research was to present statistics on obesity rates for various populations (children, adults, immigrants, various countries, et cetera) or to present research that suggested causes or contributors to obesity (26.5%) including links between weight gain in the week after birth and adult weight, lack of sleep and weight, juice consumption and childhood obesity, and the role of biochemical and genetic factors. Research demonstrating the negative health effects of obesity (links to dementia, heart problems, infertility, et cetera) accounted for 20.4% of stories.

Interventions that can prevent or decrease obesity rates comprised 11.7% of the total of obesity research reports. This fits with current news values in health-related journalism, which tends to focus on negative stories (Nelkin, 1996) and is further demonstrated in our analysis, which found that 69.4% of stories reported “bad” news about obesity. The intervention strategy reported here was unique to the larger corpus of articles not only because it focused on a strategy to improve the health of children, but also because it was a successful public health initiative rather than a medical or pharmaceutical breakthrough or story about health care provision, which tend to predominate in health reporting (Hayes et al., 2007). Also, in light of other public health crises receiving media attention such as SARS, avian flu, and mad cow disease (Harrabin, Coote, & Allen, 2003), we were interested in the representations of a much less sensational health story. We were also interested in the story’s central focus on physical activity as it remains underreported as an important health practice (Caburnay, Kreuter, Luke, Logan, Jacobsen, Reddy, Vempaty, & Zayed, 2003; Faulkner, Finlay, & Roy, 2007).
Inception: The media release
In the March 2005 issue of the American Journal of Public Health, an article was published, which reported on the effectiveness of school programs to prevent childhood obesity through the promotion of healthy eating and regular physical activity in a sample of 5,200 Canadian grade five students, their parents, and schools (Veugelers & Fitzgerald, 2005). They found that schools with a comprehensive healthy living program that incorporated the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for school programs “exhibited significantly lower rates of overweight and obesity, had healthier diets, and reported more physical activities than students from schools without nutrition programs” (Veugelers & Fitzgerald, 2005, p.432).

This research was actively promoted to the media through two venues. An archival investigation showed it was presented to journalists by the American Journal of Public Health through an email alert service that provides embargoed peer-reviewed journals for those who report on science, technology, health, and medicine. The agency that provided funding for this research, the Canadian Institute of Health Information (CIHI), also promoted the results through a media release on their website (CIHI, 2005) and through the Canadian Newswire service. From our survey of quoted sources in the media articles, both sources indicated that someone responsible for media relations within their organization contacted the media. Interviewed journalists confirmed they learned of the publication of the research through a press release from either one or both organizations. These practices are similar to those reported by Woloshin and Schwartz (2002) who found that a majority of high-impact medical journals routinely issue press releases. These releases are created by editors and press officers who noted that issues of newsworthiness were important in deciding what journal articles to promote and they geared their efforts toward attracting media attention. Issuing a press release garners more media coverage for published research than it would receive without a press release, and medical journals tend to promote research that possesses the characteristics journalists desire; generally topical information that emphasizes lifestyle variables (Stryker, 2002).

The press release issued by CIHI was examined to assess how this source organization wished to frame the research for journalists. A key feature was the comprehensive healthy living program advocated in the research with the success of the program in the schools featured as the main thrust of the press release: “This research points to evidence that establishing healthy behaviours at a young age is possible, and schools can play an important role in reducing childhood obesity and promoting healthy eating.” The release also includes relevant statistics that provide evidence to support their claims and quotations from the key sources nicely encapsulate the main messages the agency wishes to promote: “‘it is important to look at what works,’ says Jennifer Zelmer [the CIHI representative]. . . . ‘This study shows that healthy eating programs that are part of a comprehensive healthy living strategy are more effective than nutrition programs alone.’” The media release effectively translates the reported statistically-based results into plain language for journalists. Also, the tone of the release is more persuasive than the journal article, clearly advocating for implementation of
school-based programs to reduce and prevent the incidence of childhood obesity (see Chapman, 2004).

The press release situates the research within prevailing media interest by focusing on the pervasiveness and dangers of obesity in children. This adds to its newsworthiness by demonstrating that the research is timely and fits into current journalistic discussions of an obesity epidemic outlined above. Like Gard and Wright (2005) found, stories in the news media discuss the rising rates of childhood obesity, characterizing it as a growing epidemic resulting from increased rates of inactivity due to television and computer use and the preponderance of fatty “junk foods,” particularly in schools. Using language similar to those news reports in the media release demonstrates that those who prepared the press release were clearly aware of how their story fits within prevailing media constructions.

Sources’ perceptions of media coverage
We identified two sources from the media reports of the research. Both completed and returned our questionnaire and reported they were very satisfied with the media coverage. This research received one of the highest amounts of coverage during the six month period of our larger media tracking (Faulkner, et al., 2007), and the sources indicated in the questionnaire that they were aware of the extent of the attention they received from the Canadian media. The sources reported that they were also pleased with the accuracy of the coverage and were likely to cooperate with the media in the future.

When asked if they disagreed or agreed with statements regarding the role of the media in health promotion one source also clearly acknowledged the distinction between health promotion and media coverage: “I distinguish ‘media coverage’ and ‘health promotion’ as two very different things” (Questionnaire). While we should not read too much into this statement, it does demonstrate that sources acknowledge the scope and limitations of media reporting on health, especially its inadequacy as a tool to promote health (Lupton, 1995). However, they also wish to promote their organization and this likely explains their satisfaction with the coverage since it contributes to their goal of raising awareness, part of CIHI’s mission as stated in the press release:

To provide timely, accurate and comparable information. CIHI’s data and reports inform health policies, support the effective delivery of health services and raise awareness among Canadians of the factors that contribute to good health. (CIHI, 2005)

CIHI’s actions regarding the promotion of this research point to a desire to change Canadian school curriculums and to encourage the promotion of healthy living programs to prevent obesity in children. One way to do this is to garner media coverage of this research.

Mediation

The role of journalists
The ways in which health organizations, academic journals, and researchers define the story for the media becomes apparent by examining the media release and the role of sources as part of the inception process. Examining the processes
of production, especially the role of journalists, reveals another interdependent part of the practice of creating news. In open-ended interviews the journalists were asked to describe how they came to report on this specific story and all mentioned the press release from the funding agency, CIHI, and the journal article as their main information sources. Interviewed journalists discussed the importance of the media release in shaping their stories. Similar to Erjavec’s (2005) examination of journalists’ reliance on press releases, reporters remarked on how the source organizations’ media releases made the process of producing the story “really easy”:

“Well, the sponsorship agency, the Canadian Institute for Health Information—they were very aggressive and proactive. I would not normally follow public health journals, but because it was sponsored by a Canadian agency and this agency sent out a media release a week before it was released and they encouraged us to report about it. They found me, really; it was literally on my desk to write about. They were clearly pitching to public health and education reporters to get attention. (Interview, Specialist reporter, newspaper, March 23, 2005)

When asked about how they produced this story, the journalistic process was explained but without much detail. Like most people, journalists perform a set of routines which are probably second nature and can be difficult to describe (Deuze, 2005; Schudson, 1989). The journalists spoke of arranging interviews, reading the materials, and writing the stories:

“We have a reporter and camera man in Halifax, and we were not sure which one of us was going to do the story depending on whatever other medical news there was that day. So [a camera man] went out and filmed it all, we set it up, he jumped [edited] it all and then they sent the tapes back here. (Interview Specialist reporter, television, March 10, 2005)

In terms of this particular story, journalists remarked on this being an easy piece to assemble as the source organizations did a good job of providing the necessary materials:

“It is really easy when you have the press release package ... and you actually go through the academic journal that they give you ahead of time so you don’t have to rush. So you really need the researcher [source] to provide a colourful quote. . . . all the technical data is outlined in the journal and the interesting part leaks out in the press release (Interview, Specialist reporter, newspaper, March 23, 2005).

Discussions about journalistic processes also reveal the kinds of choices reporters make about what to report including the news values that appeal to journalists who cover stories about health and physical activity. When asked what made this particular story newsworthy, journalists noted the research presented something new and did not repeat a common health message that the journalists believed “everyone knows” already; people need to become more physically active, eat less, and eat more nutritious foods to prevent obesity. According to the journalists, the novelty of this research was its emphasis on a program that could be implemented fairly easily and was shown to be effective:
We liked the story because it actually offers a solution. We are tired of doing stories about the growing obesity problem among children, and we really like to do stories on solutions, especially made-in-Canada solutions. And this is so straightforward and to me it made an incredible amount of sense (Interview, Specialist reporter, television, March 10, 2005).

I found the Halifax one kind of interesting because they appeared to have found some sort of system that works and moved the bar to try and change behaviours. (Interview, Specialist reporter, newspaper, March 10, 2005)

What appealed to journalists was the emphasis on solutions and the program’s demonstrated success in a Canadian research context. The story was newsworthy because of its novelty and its locality; similar research in another country may not have been reported on by these journalists (Tuchman, 1978).

Another factor that made this story newsworthy, according to journalists, was that stories like this are popular with the news media and audiences, and fit into current media discussions about childhood obesity:

Anything to do with kids and overweight will always get picked up. It is one of the hot topics in the media because the notion of children being unhealthy and the obesity rates going up and kids over weight in North America. It is just a really hot topic and all the editors have kids and love it. . . it is just not hard to sell the story [Interview, Specialist reporter, newspaper, March 23, 2005).

As we noted earlier, obesity is not a novel story in the media. There has been a rise in media reporting on obesity in the press (IFIC, 2007) with Lawrence noting that “the growth in real-world obesity has been mirrored, though with some delay, in the growth of news coverage of obesity” (2004, p. 64). News reporting of obesity is replete with health warnings of an “obesity epidemic,” which will endanger health due to the increased risk of diabetes, heart disease and stroke. These warnings are particularly dire in discussions of childhood obesity and related negative health outcomes with warnings that today’s children may be the first to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents if current trends continue (Gard & Wright, 2005). This story fits nicely within a recurring news frame within the Canadian news media.

The news reports
On February 22, 2005, the CTV Evening News and CBC’s The National presented stories about this particular study and the school-based healthy living strategy. On February 23, a representative from CIHI was interviewed on the CTV morning magazine program, Canada AM, and discussed this particular research. Media reports on this study also appeared in four local Canadian newspapers (Vancouver Sun, Edmonton Journal, Toronto Star, Halifax Chronicle-Herald), and the two national newspapers (Globe and Mail and National Post).

It is important to situate these media reports within the processes of news production to understand how the television and newspaper producers regard this particular story. One method is to assess the prominence of the story within the newspaper or newscast. Prominence can be measured through such indicators as the origin of the story (news wire service, specialist reporter, general reporter,
columnist, or reprint/rebroadcast), headline size, word count/story running time, the presence of a visual and the location within the newspaper (section and whether it appears above the fold in a broadsheet), or newscast (lead story or last story). For example, stories with visuals and a longer length, appearing on the front page of a section, above the fold, are more prominent and more likely to be read (Caburnay et al., 2003; Faulkner et al., 2007).

The print articles exhibit many of the important qualities that denote prominence in the newspapers including being in the front page of a section, and being a lengthy story (the average word count is 606). The reports were positioned as “hard news” instead of lifestyle or personal interest stories due to their appearance in the front sections of the papers (Tuchman, 1972) (also see Table 1). Half of the reports were written by specialist health or medical journalists and the story was front page news in Halifax, where the research was conducted. It appeared in the specialized health section of the Globe and Mail newspaper, which is generally regarded as the national agenda-setting English-language newspaper in Canada. It also appeared in the National Post, the other national English-language newspaper and in the Toronto Star, which has the highest circulation in Canada.

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In terms of television news, this story appeared in three nationally broadcast television news programs. Each of the broadcasts were full-length stories for television news: the Canada AM story was 3 minutes 20 seconds in length; the National’s was 2 minutes 40 seconds; and the CTV News story was 2 minutes, 5 seconds. From our six-month analysis these are amongst the longest segments for these news programs and are consistent with similar findings about the length of news pieces in research examining reports about physical activity in television news (Wallace, 2004). The importance of the stories can also be assessed by the types of reports that were presented. The Canada AM piece is a live interview with the Vice President of CIHI, the funding agency. The CTV Evening News report presented by the National Medical Specialist and the CBC news piece were both full stories, which included visuals of physically active children from one of the schools participating in the study, as well as comments from students, parents, and a representative of CIHI.
The news reports also gave the research credibility through a number of devices that subtly suggest to audiences the validity of the study (Faulkner et al., 2007). This validity can be established through the impetus for the story and the way in which it is reported. In both television and print, the importance given to this story is evident in the resources provided by the news agencies in terms of staff time for journalists and others involved in the production process such as camera operators and editors. These stories were fully produced instead of reprints/rebroadcasts from newswires or a matter of merely having the news anchor read a thirty-second spot without visuals in a “news in brief” portion of the broadcast (Tuchman, 1978). Credibility was further established in all nine of the reports through the presentation of research data including sample sizes: “The study, involving more than 5,000 fifth-graders in nearly 300 Nova Scotia schools” (Schmidt, 2005). Some reports also included findings: “In schools without a healthy living strategy, about 10 per cent of children were obese and 33 per cent were overweight, compared to schools with the program, where about 4 per cent of youngsters were obese and 18 per cent were overweight” (Picard, 2005b). The reports also provided the names and affiliations of the researchers, the funding agency and the academic journal in which the research was published to add credibility to the issue and situate the story as hard news (Faulkner et al., 2007).

Textual analysis

By assessing the prominence and the credibility of the research through examining the news reports it is clear the media considered this an important story. However, a detailed examination of the texts is also required to scrutinize the translation of the CIHI press release through the media and the representations of the issues it constructs. A close reading of the texts shows that all of the news reports contained similar discursive elements in their presentations of the story. Three main themes were apparent in all reports.

First, each story situates the research within the media’s ongoing discussion of obesity and the childhood obesity epidemic:

[W]e know that today’s kids are much more likely than their parents are to be overweight or obese (O’Regan, 2005).

“Childhood obesity is a real problem and lots of people are looking for answers,” she said (Picard, 2005b).

[T]he rates of overweight and obese children have tripled in Canada over the past two decades (Schmidt, 2005).

[C]hildhood overweight and obesity rates are two to three times what they were 15 years ago (Carey, 2005).

As discussed earlier, the media have already reported that childhood obesity is a problem and in this story they build on that “knowledge” to position this story within the discursive framework they have created: “it becomes even more important news, because it is regarded as important news” (Vasterman, 2005, p. 7). The uniformity of the message across media outlets also demonstrates another aspect of production namely the pressure to report on what other media
is generating. In this case, the audience is reminded of the problem of childhood obesity, that it is growing, and that Canada’s children are facing dire health consequences.

It is this prior identification of a childhood obesity epidemic that helps bolster the newsworthiness of this research since it builds on a story, which has been regularly reported in the Canadian media. It also leads the reader into the second main theme, which is the novelty of this particular research. This “new solution” is emphasized for readers through discussions of the success of a school-based healthy living strategy, which is not available in most Canadian schools. While the media reports on the newly published research, it also emphasizes its success and utility for Canadian children:

“The important message is, programs can work,” Veugelers said. Teachers and parents can take confidence that a school program, properly run, can make kids healthier and slimmer (Ruttan, 2005, p. B1)

This is something that Nova Scotia is now giving to the world in terms of knowledge about how to help our kids stay healthy. (Lipscombe & Delaney, 2005, p. B7)

Some reports also included discussion of local stories related to this research including province-wide and school-based initiatives such as mandatory physical activity in schools and enhanced healthy lifestyle curriculums. By emphasizing local initiatives, this moves the story beyond a report of academic research to a discussion of how this research might shape health promotion programs.

The final theme centres on what is missing from the news reports. One striking characteristic of this story is that all the evaluations of the research are very positive. Generally, media reports seek comments from various parties to represent different “sides” to a story (that is, to present the research objectively) or to present an alternative critical viewpoint illustrating the “strategic ritual of balance” (Tuchman, 1972, p. 660). Of the nine reports, only five use commentators to expand on the story. The examples here are from a government official and a parent involved in the program:

“I’m actually delighted that Health Canada is doing this,” Ujjal Dosanjh, federal minister of health, said in Ottawa. “I think that we need to persuade and convince our partners across the country—the provinces and the territories—that this is a good strategy. . . . They have money—part of the $41 billion additional (in health funding) over the next 10 years.” (Lipscombe & Delaney, 2005, p. B7)

“What I like is that my son is getting the knowledge he needs to grow up healthy,” said Janet Peill, whose son, Isaac, attends Port Williams Elementary School in Port Williams, N.S. “He’s more aware of what it is to be healthy and physically active and, hopefully, that will create some good habits for the rest of his life.” (Picard, 2005b, p. A17)

Only one of the articles provides any kind of dissent. However this is not an evaluation of the research, but a discussion about constraints to the implementation of this research in Toronto schools:
Twenty minutes of physical education every day is supposed to become mandatory this fall in Ontario elementary schools, however the boards are still “trying to understand how we can do this with no money,” said Tony Petitti, program co-ordinator of health and physical education for the Toronto Catholic board (Carey, 2005, p. B2).

These quotations reflect the findings of our examination of reporting of physical activity research in the Canadian news media, which found that all articles but one were uncritical in tone (Faulkner et al., 2007). However, the lack of a critical assessment of the research also defines the issue positively; the healthy living strategy is valuable and the barriers to implementation are the issue, not the validity of the research.

This examination of a news text illustrates that both television and newspapers presented the research results in very similar ways. The stories rely on a prevalent news frame—the childhood obesity epidemic—to situate the research for the audience and to distinguish the newsworthiness of this novel and local research which proposes a solution to rising obesity rates. The reports also frame the research as important and therefore newsworthy through the prominence afforded to the story, including the use of information such as data and by referring to institutional affiliations, which demonstrates the prestige and credibility of both the lead author and the funding agency and by the omission of any negative or critical commentary about the research itself.

Who defines what is fit to print?

This natural history of one media event reveals the limitations of focusing only on texts or a media-centric view of news production (Fenton et al., 1998). By using a social constructivist approach, which seeks to understand the processes of production and inception, the roles of both the journalists who write the media stories and the sources/communications staff who “pitch” these stories to the media become apparent. What is most clear is the interdependent nature of these two groups. Journalists rely on health organizations for their story ideas and these organizations seek media attention to promote their work. While it seems these organizations are adept in crafting their message to appeal to the media and appear to be the primary definers of the story, the extent to which they choose elements that they perceive as newsworthy in order to receive this attention requires further scrutiny.

The results of this unstructured and informal “collaboration” are apparent when comparing extracts from both the news release and one broadcast (see Table 2), which clearly show the importance of the press release in shaping the story for journalists.

While the journalist has reworded the content of the press release, the information presented is the same. This particular news report was chosen because it nicely summarizes the same information in one paragraph, but the key elements of this first paragraph of the press release are presented in all the media reports, though not always all together as was the case in this example. This is similar to comparisons done by Erjavec (2005) who examines what he calls the growing incidence of public relations news reports whereby journalists often summarize or replicate press releases in their stories, and rely on “pre-packed” information over
which they have limited control (Anderson, Petersen, & David, 2005). Rather than pursuing proactive investigations, our findings certainly provide evidence that journalists are making reactive choices when creating news (Davis, 2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Press Release</th>
<th>The National, February 22, 2005</th>
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<td><strong>The study, published today in the American Journal of Public Health, reports that only 4% of fifth-grade students enrolled in schools following a comprehensive healthy living program were obese—versus 10% of fifth-grade students in schools with a less comprehensive program or with no program at all.</strong></td>
<td>A study published today in the American Journal of Public Health gives the Annapolis Valley school program top marks. 5,200 grade five students in nearly 300 Nova Scotia schools were surveyed. <strong>Ten percent of students were considered overweight or obese. But in the seven schools with the healthy living program only 4% were obese.</strong></td>
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Table 2: News release and broadcast comparison

This illustrates the important role that sources and health organizations play in shaping the processes of mediated communication, and the rise of public relations work within the voluntary sector (Deacon, 1996). Our focus on the press release and questionnaire data does not provide a full picture of the processes of inception and this role requires further examination in order to both help us better understand the processes of inception that shape the media strategies of health organizations and also to improve the media advocacy work of these organizations (Chapman, 2001). The meaning making that occurs in these organizations is complex and likely negotiated between various interests within the agencies (Faulkner & Finlay, 2006). Also important to assess is the process of knowledge translation that is occurring through this media work. What role do media releases such as these play in promoting both the health organizations and the health issues they advocate for? Is this the best way to transmit information to the public and do they receive an accurate account of the research through media reports? Research with both health organizations and media audiences would further our understandings of these questions and the media advocacy process.

By examining the processes of production, routine journalistic practices and reporters’ assessments of newsworthiness, a better understanding is gained of what journalists consider “fit to print.” The journalists were interested in this research because it fit into an established media framework about obesity and the need for lifestyle change to prevent the “dire” health consequences facing today’s overweight and obese children. However, this research did not merely present further evidence of a childhood obesity epidemic, but instead provided something new and therefore newsworthy: a home-grown, successful, empirically tested, comprehensive school-based healthy living program. While issues of newsworthiness—novelty, locality and familiarity—were important to the choice of this particular research, the examination of the more mundane aspects of the journal-

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Press Release

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The National, February 22, 2005

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istic process reveal that this story was also chosen because it satisfied other criteria (Finlay et al., 2006). This story was reported because it was actively promoted by the funding organization, and these efforts ensured the key elements of most news stories were readily available for the journalists to incorporate into their reports. The sources provided the necessary background materials and data, ensured the researcher and a representative from CIHI were available for interviews, and arranged for opportunities to collect visuals for photographs and television reports.

Journalists are clearly reliant on sources to provide story ideas, which suggests that source organizations are pivotal in the processes of mediated health communication. This mirrors trends in Britain where there has been an increase in the use and influence of professional public relations practitioners and a decline in the editorial resources of news producers (Davis, 2000). By using a natural history approach we show that journalists replicated the tone and intent of CIHI’s press release by framing the story in terms of the success of a school program promoting healthy lifestyles and the need to implement similar programs across the country. Moreover, our study illustrates that the reporting of health research in the media, and the journalist-source relationship, has many of the characteristics described in research about the reporting of the sciences in general (e.g., Stryker, 2002; Fenton et al., 1999).

Whether this is a concern or not may depend on differing perspectives regarding the role of the media in advancing the levels of critical health literacy of Canadians (Hayes et al., 2007). We must ask if the public is being served by news reporting that does not critically assess the research that forms the foundation for policy initiatives advocated by health organizations. While journalists and sources are indeed mutually reliant, our case study indicates that health organizations are the dominant partner and this is in keeping with some critical analyses of the media serving as a passive and complacent “conveyor belt” for interest groups with well-resourced public relation machines (Davis, 2003). At the least, journalists are not critically engaging with the current research on obesity promoted by health organizations, academic journals, and commercial enterprises. As a result, there is a failure to situate obesity and health in a wider context in which the issues are not as certain as those promoting this research may assert. Examination of practices of health journalists including their education (Skinner, Gasher, & Compton, 2001) and work routines is warranted. Picard (Picard, 2005a) notes that health reporting could be much improved through a more sceptical and critical analysis by journalists. How this might be achieved in the context of diminishing newsroom resources remains a challenge (Thorson, 2006).

This case study represents a platform from which to build other natural histories of mediated health communication (Deacon et al., 1999). Media reports are historically located beginning with the work of health organizations who seek to communicate their messages. Future study is needed to examine audience perceptions of physical activity and health research to fully understand the “circuit of communication” (van Dijk, 1988). Audiences also actively make sense of media stories about health in particular ways, which may in varying degrees accept or resist the messages created by organizations, sources, and journalists (Finlay &
Faulkner, 2005). Following these inception processes and products allows for a detailed consideration of the social construction of health and physical activity messages in the media, which seeks to better understand who defines the story and the relationship between health organizations, media and the public and policymakers who consume these messages.

Acknowledgement
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Notes
1. The articles appearing in the Vancouver Sun and the National Post were both excerpted from a piece written by a reporter with the CanWest News wire service (CanWest News owns both of these newspapers). They are treated as one article in the analysis that follows unless otherwise indicated.

References


