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THE MEDIA'S DOSE OF DUTY: GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL REPORTING

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ABSTRACT

“The Media’s Dose of Duty: Guidelines for Ethical Vaccine Reporting” was developed with the aim to assist media practitioners in making proper choices in addressing vaccination issues with specific purposes. Using a grounded theory approach, the guideline was a result of interviews with health experts, media professionals, and government officials, analyses of content related to vaccination, and was later refined through a discussion with the media practitioners in Malaysia. This guideline is unique as it presents a contextual and evidence-based content that is relevant to the Malaysian context. In this guideline, there are four processes that should be undertaken by the media practitioners when handling vaccination reporting starting with consideration of general issues followed by strategies in reporting, verification, and affirmation. This four-step process is followed by the rule-of-four that encapsulates the dos and don’ts of vaccination reporting. Among the advantages of using this guideline are maintaining the media’s credibility because bad reporting undermines media status while reinforcing their credibility to the public. The guideline is hoped to combat vaccine misinformation while increasing vaccine literacy in the community.

Keywords: Ethical reporting, Misinformation, Media, Vaccine reporting

INTRODUCTION

The research innovation entitled the “Media's Dose of Duty: Guidelines for Ethical Vaccine Reporting” was developed to help media professionals make the right decisions while covering vaccination-related topics for certain objectives. The guideline consists of general considerations, exposure and portrayal strategies, verification, and affirmation. The process in the guideline is summarised in Figure 1 below:

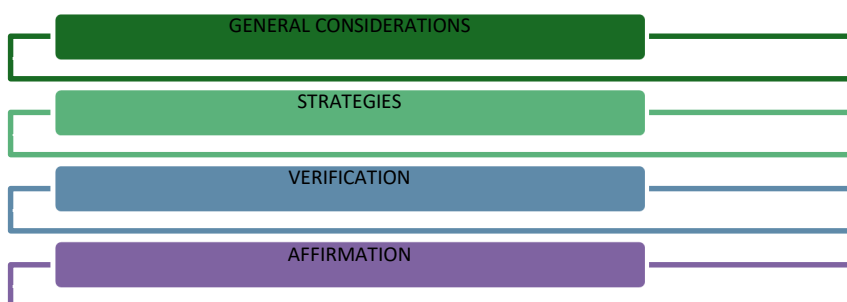


Figure 1.: The four-stage media reporting process on vaccination

In the general considerations, media practitioners are reminded to perceive their roles to assist individuals in making an informed decision on vaccine uptake. This includes report cautiously by maintaining accuracy over being the first to publish; avoid featuring comments that could reduce vaccine confidence; be proactive to current vaccine issues and reactive to their related concerns; use responsible and positive headlines; focus on issue-specific reporting; understand the details of information before reporting; consider appropriate photos and other supporting materials that will not create fear towards vaccination; and acquire expert views before publication.

The guideline proposes two strategies; exposure and portrayal. In the exposure strategy, story placement, frequency, and slot of publication as well as interactive format should be considered in vaccine reporting. While the portrayal strategy emphasises on deciding which facts or sides of an event or issue should be reported. Reporters should consider the use of religious views and persuasion techniques (Ghazali et al., 2025), such as storytelling format, and address specific readers and their concerns in their news reports.

In the third process, the media practitioners are advised to carry out self-verification and external confirmation by approaching the right expert. This entails checking the historical background, provenance, and authenticity of claimed information by sources.

The last process focuses on affirmation, in which news reports should try to provide statements at the end of the news reports to demystify misinformation and misconceptions, such as by publishing the misinformation and its sources, directing audiences to the right sources, and listing the verified platforms that audiences could refer to with regard to vaccination. In short, the guideline highlights the dos and don'ts as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1.: The dos and don'ts in reporting vaccination stories

THE DO'S	THE DON'TS
Collaborate and verify	Feature anti-vaxxers on linear communication
Sensitive and responsible reporting	Unverified, one-sided sources
Proactive on continuous education	Clickbait, sensational reporting
Reactive on current debates	Conflicting viewpoints

METHOD

Based on in-depth interviews, a focus group discussion, a triangulation technique using respondents' confirmation of evidence, and content analyses of Malaysian vaccination reporting undertaken in this research, a context-specific guide entitled "Media's Dose of Duty: Guidelines for Ethical Vaccine Reporting" was developed. Consequently, the final stage of the development of the guideline involved seeking opinions from experts in health communication and vaccination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This guideline aims to help media institutions lead national efforts in raising awareness about vaccination. It mainly works to echo the effort of public health services in Malaysia. As the media is often used as an agent of social change and national development, they should as well respond to issues of public concern such as health. As the background, vaccines were introduced in Malaysia by the Health Ministry through the National Immunisation Programme in the 1950s with the aim of protecting all children regardless of race from diseases like hepatitis B, diphtheria, whooping cough, poliomyelitis, measles, the human papillomavirus, and a few others (Arumugum & Solhi, 2019). The immunisation programme has been improved from time to time to provide comprehensive coverage for children's health. Parents are given appointments with health clinics for scheduled check-ups for their child from birth. The immunisation activity is under the Family Health Development Division (BPKK), which is the heart of public health services. The health of infants and children is monitored and recorded at intervals to meet their health needs. However, despite the continuous care and supervision, recent data showed a declining rate in vaccine uptake among children, especially from the records of the immunisation schedule.

Therefore, the guideline was developed and proposed to be used to educate the current and future media practitioners. Notably, media guidelines are commonly used to guard the media practice on many

issues. The guideline is hoped to encourage responsible, specific, and sensitive reporting on vaccination among media practitioners. It is important to note that the guideline is not a form of censorship but a protocol to ensure important vaccination details are communicated accurately and clearly. Ultimately, the guideline will ensure that the public will receive accurate, verified, and truthful information related to vaccination that will influence their vaccine uptake decision. This will assist the government's aim to create a healthy society through the development of herd immunity that protects the whole community from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Another defining advantage of this guideline is it serves to maintain media credibility as a trusted information source because bad reporting undermines media status. Besides, the guide will help media institutions to perform self-regulation while giving ongoing vaccination awareness through reporting (Mohamed et al., 2022). Therefore, the works of media could be synergised to be in line with the public health services, government's aspirations, and self-regulatory bodies like Communication and Multimedia Content Forum (CMCF).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the "Media's Dose of Duty: Guidelines for Ethical Vaccine Reporting" is an important product entailing the *process* of responsible and sensitive vaccine reporting. The guideline is currently being reviewed by media practitioners to improve its content to ensure possible adoption among them. The guide will also be published under CMCF, an institution under Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), which is responsible for maintaining and promoting industry self-regulation as well as supervision of content dissemination and related issues enforced by MCMC.

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