Reviewer's report

Title: Media coverage of health issues and how to work more effectively with journalists: a qualitative study.

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Reviewer: Sarah E Gollust

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- Major Compulsory Revisions

1. In the introduction (paragraph 4), authors refer to the "many studies of news production processes" that exist, but they do not cite any here. Might they consider the work of Herbert Gans or Michael Schudson (among others) who contributed important work on how news organization structure, values, and other socio-political factors influence the content of journalism? While these sociological works do not refer to public health topics (as the authors mention) they should make sure they at least acknowledge important work on news production from other disciplines.

2. In the same paragraph (Introduction, paragraph 4) authors state "Some do identify that health communication will always be limited within the mass media" but offer no citation of work that makes that claim.

3. I am not comfortable with the authors' claim at the conclusion of the introduction that their study "provides insights generalisable to much of the media practice in the western world." Given their qualitative methodology, the goal is not generalizability but to generate themes and nuance related to the specific topic at hand.

4. I would like to see a more concise and clear statement of the research question addressed by this study at the end of the last paragraph of the Introduction.

5. Authors should report more detail under "Recruitment and sampling" about how the 16 study participants were selected and why. How many bylines were deemed sufficiently many to recruit the print journalists? What do authors mean by the "criteria from the sampling framework" from which TV and radio journalists were selected? How many journalists were invited to participate? Did anybody decline to participate? Why was the total sample of 16 used? Did authors reach thematic saturation? Or was there some other reason for this relatively small final sample size?

6. There is no information on the final sample of 16 journalists; in fact, the only place where the N of the study is reported is in the abstract. Authors should add a paragraph describing the sample and any relevant statistics (how many worked for print news outlets versus radio versus print; how many were specialist
medical journalists versus non-medical; how many were editors versus reporters; etc.)

7. Under Analysis, authors state that one a priori interest that guided this analysis was recommendations for health professionals working with the media. Was this an explicit question that the interviewers asked, or was this information gleaned from the data analysis?

8. In the presentation of the results and discussion, authors discuss the topic of the study (avian influenza and pandemic planning) only in passing. Do they have any data to bear that could help readers evaluate whether their findings relate to public health reporting in particular? As presented, the primary finding (of balancing competing aims amid constraint) is not novel, nor does it speak to issues related to health reporting in particular. Authors might consider more carefully how the topic of the interviews (a salient public health topic) affected, or not, the key themes in the analysis.

9. One possible new contribution of this study might be further elaboration of whether or not journalistic conceptions of newsworthiness are the same or different in health reporting than in reporting on other topics; in the paragraph beginning "A health story’s ability to gain entry to the day’s news was influenced by...", authors define some familiar domains of newsworthiness that do not seem specific to health topics. Is one implication of this finding that the determinants of newsworthiness are pretty similar across domains? As a related point, earlier in this section (paragraph beginning "In both television and print media"...authors refer to the point that "all but the most newsworthy stores would be excluded." Can authors explain how these editors defined "newsworthiness" in this context? This would help make this study more novel.

10. Perhaps the key contribution of this study is in its distinguishing between the assets of specialist health reporters and more generalist reporters, particularly given the declining resources devoted to news media outlets and the declining funding for such specialist journalists (at least in the United States). However, the section ("A key role") could be improved. First, how many journalists were specialists versus generalists? (See comment 5, above). It sounds like the description of the assets that specialist health reporters provided (familiarity with topics, expert networks, autonomy) could just as easily been obtained by dint of their seniority rather than their particular health orientation. Can authors distinguish these? Were all of the health/medical reporters in the study also ones who were most senior or older in their organization? I am concerned that specialist reporters are synonymous (i.e., confounded) with seniority here, which makes authors’ finding of the worth of specialist reporters difficult to extrapolate.

11. In the discussion, I am not sure all of their main conclusions are supported by the data they present. In particular, authors argue that use of syndicated material erodes localism; but, in their results section they stated that their participants actively sought out "going local" as a way to attract readership. How can I make sense of this contradiction?
12. Authors only report one limitation of their study, that the participants were self-reporting their views and actions. Authors should report other limitations of their study, sample, and design.

- Minor Essential Revisions

1. I found the references as cited confusing since they cite all references in order, thus duplicating some, rather than referring to citations referred to early in the manuscript by that number.

- Discretionary Revisions

1. Introduction, last paragraph. This paragraph could be improved by more specificity. Authors could elaborate as to why the complexity in journalistic process "makes researching journalists very important"; so too could they elaborate how this research can be linked to the "possibility for improved engagement with the mass media." Adding more information here on the motivation and significance of the study would be helpful to readers.

2. I know of at least one other study on journalistic practices in the health context, on Canadian journalists' reporting on social determinants of health: Gasher, Mike, Michael V. Hayes, Ian Ross, Robert A. Hackett, Donald Gutstein & James R. Dunn. (2007). Spreading the News: Social Determinants of Health Reportage in Canadian Daily Newspapers, Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol. 32, pp.557-574. Authors might cite this as part of the "relatively small pool of empirical literature on journalistic practices" (Introduction, last paragraph)

3. In the section called "Study design" authors might indicate when the avian/pandemic influenza outbreak and its media reporting occurred, so that readers might evaluate whether the timing of the interviews was appropriate.

4. Authors should carefully review the manuscript for clarity; for instance, the sentence in the third paragraph of the Discussion beginning "Thus a journalists' ways of seeing..." is quite long and complex.

5. I would like to see more discussion in the conclusion about the implications of their findings, and in particular, their recommendations for public health professionals, in the context of a changing media world: declining readership/viewership, declining budgets, increased fragmentation of viewer, rise of the Internet, etc.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.