Reviewer’s report

Title: Print media coverage of primary health care and related research evidence in South Africa

Version: 2 Date: 14 April 2015

Reviewer: E Thompson

Reviewer’s report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
The authors clearly define the question that the research seeks to address and situate it within the context of a dearth in research.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?
The method adopted by the authors is appropriate for the questions posed, but with regards to policy implications, the paper could benefit from a more intimate qualitative analysis which will illuminate and guide policy direction and reform.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?
The authors provide mainly percentages for their data. It would be helpful if the authors could provide some statistical analysis of the data to help explain the percentages and to show the relationships. It is also important to provide kappa scores for all the main variables coded in the reliability test.

The authors may want to take a second look at the reported figures. For instance on page 9 paragraph 4, the highest number of overlaps is presented as 7 but in figure 4 it is 6. Again on page 9, the last paragraph, the authors suggest that there were 144 news stories published in provincial newspapers but in the next line, they give 136 news stories as the number of news stories published in provincial newspapers while table 2 indicates 147 news stories.

In table 2, some of the items do not add up. For instance Western Cape news articles is given as 41 but when one adds up the individual news articles, they come up to 40. Paragraph 2 page 10 gives 10 (5.8%) as stories discussing schools but table 3 gives 12 (6.9%) for the same issue.

4. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation?
As indicated above, some of the numbers in tables require a second look to reflect what is in the write up or vice versa.

5. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
The manuscript is largely presented well, however, it could benefit from some presentation revisions. For instance, “principal findings” and “findings in relation to other studies” must all be presented discussion. Findings are similar to results
and should be deleted. Also “strengths and limitations must be placed before conclusions. “Implication for further research” may be more appropriate after “strengths and limitations”

6. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The discussion is interesting and has potential but requires some more analysis. For example do the media systems in South Africa influence what the media publishes? The main problem of the research is to “explore how the print media covers primary health care and related research evidence”. Presenting descriptives alone does not do justice to the problem; providing some more statistical analysis might help. Some explanation of media ownership and management systems may help to explain some of the issues covered better. A discussion of provincial newspapers and national newspapers may also help explain why the former provided more stories on primary health care and where policy maker may want to disseminate policy information. The authors could provide some background about media in South Africa and how they relate to health and policy issues to set the stage for the discussion

Page 13 paragraph two: The point the authors make in this paragraph is unclear. What is the information provided that supports an understanding of issues needed for strengthening primary health care?? Again what is the information provided that strengthens policy making?

Page 13 last paragraph: you may want to discuss the primary health care policy's stance on rape and sexual violence and help us understand whether it is a primary issue or like the media coverage it is not highlighted.

Implications

The authors present some implications of the paper for policy but the link is not clear. How does knowing what health issues media cover help direct policy? The finding that issues relating to accountability of the state in financing and delivery of primary health care services received most coverage does not tell us much about what was actually in the news. It could be that such issues received coverage because the state was making itself more accountable or opening up its books for scrutiny. It could also reflect what policy holders were making available to the public about state financial accountability and thus a reflection of the information provided to the media by policy makers.

Some of the implications are a little stretched. Also, I am not sure how limited coverage of rape and sexual violence shows a lack of, or poor knowledge about primary health care services primary health care services for survivors of rape, or low levels of health seeking behaviour of survivors. It might a result of the definition of “news worthiness” used by the media.

If indeed limited coverage of rape and sexual violence can be related to lack of “proper print media coverage of such stories”, what can policy making in health do about the issue? Should this not be a call on media regulators or owners?
7. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

8. Is the writing acceptable?
Yes but some minor revisions and editing is required.

Please make your report as constructive and detailed as possible in your comments so that authors have the opportunity to overcome any serious deficiencies that you find and please also divide your comments into the following categories:

- **Major Compulsory Revisions** (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

  The implication for policy is not clear. The authors also need to consider comments made under point 6 for other major issues that require consideration.

- **Minor Essential Revisions** (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

  Page 12 paragraph 1 “this seems(s)”; This sentence on needs to be reworked. It sounds incomplete ie. Reflect the effects of the community care worker policy framework on what or who?

- **Discretionary Revisions** (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

  Consider including an in depth thematic analysis of some of the stories to enhance policy implication.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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