

Can Media Relations promote public health? The pharmaceutical sector in the Portuguese press

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Abstract

The research project "Disease in the news" (FCT) has been constituted as an observatory of media information on health, produced in Portugal since 2008. In this context, we have undertaken a systematic study of the work of the institutional sources of the health sector, the promotion of information to citizen by the media. This study includes an examination of journalistic texts produced by three national newspapers - *Expresso*, *Público* e *Jornal de Notícias* - and a direct contact with healthcare organizations identified as media sources. For this research, we analyse the presence of the pharmaceutical industry in the national press, looking for more clues about the role of the organizations in the health sector when delivering information to the public - through the media - and, consequently, in health promotion.

This work has some theoretical references: the area of health communication and health promotion, and the organizational communication and public relations. Previous research had focused on a study of more visible journalistic sources (clearly, official sources; Lopes *et al.* 2011). It was time to examine the marginal presences. The pharmaceutical industry is one of these cases, despite having organized and highly experienced communication structures. In this context, we decided to investigate how to draw the advice "low profile" of pharmaceutical companies, in Portugal, from: (1) a quantitative analysis of journalistic texts (found in the papers above), (2) a analysis content to those same texts, and (3) interviews with the communication departments of pharmaceutical companies. We start the investigation of a corpus of 290 newspaper articles, with references to pharmaceutical companies practices (representing only 4.6% of total health texts published during the study period – 2008-2011).

Keywords: pharmaceuticals, public relations, heath communication, sources of information

1. Introduction

In this paper we analyze the presence of the pharmaceutical industry in the Portuguese media, in an attempt to understand health organizations' role in informing the public through the media, and consequently promoting health. These concerns are part of a broader project that we have been developing since 2008 and which aims at systematically understanding the newsmaking of health topics in the Portuguese press (Lopes *et al.*, 2009). This research integrates media content analysis and a study of journalistic practices and organized news sources' behavior, since our goal is to better understand the health newsmaking process in Portugal.

Up until now, our research project has focused on the most covered news sources (which undoubtedly are the official sources; Ruão *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, it is now the moment to analyze those sources who are pushed aside, becoming marginal presences, which is the case of the pharmaceutical industry.

Although it has organized and experienced communication structures, the pharmaceutical industry was under-represented in our news corpus, gathered between 2008 and 2011. Companies within this sector would appear in only 4.6% of the total amount of health news articles published during that period. For that reason, we considered this a relevant case study and decided to deepen the information we already had, by applying a triangulation of methods that will be explained further in this paper.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Communication Studies

According to Kreps *et al.* (1998), Health Communication is “a vibrant and important field of study concerned with the powerful roles performed by human and mediated communication in health care delivery and health promotion”.

Researchers within this field agree on the importance of health communication to populations, given the impact on several communication domains, as *interpersonal*, *group*, *organizational* and *social* ones. They believe the spreading of information and the development of health promotion campaigns are important to the process of healthcare delivery and also to reach one's individual goals in this domain. Researchers also argue that health

professionals should develop communication strategies in order to fulfill these goals, thus ending the social inequalities that characterize this sector (Freimuth & Quinn, 2004).

Still according to Kreps *et al.* (1998), Health Communication has two interdependent branches of research: Health Care Delivery, which examines how communication influences the delivery of health care to populations, and Health Promotion, which studies the persuasive use of communication messages and media to promote public health. This last branch has attracted researchers within mass communication studies, who have been studying the use of communication campaigns applied to risk prevention and public health promotion. It is a research area that also includes the analysis on the media's use to spread health information.

So, Health Promotion is a sub-field within Health Communication and has been identified by the World Health Organization in 1986 as “the process of enabling people to exert control over the determinants of health and thereby improve their health” (*Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion*, World Health Organization, 1986).

Consequently, the purpose of health promotion activities is to develop both individual and group skills to act on health determinants. This seems to be a type of citizen and community empowerment (Nutbeam, 1998). Health promotion campaigns have been oriented to the decrease of socioeconomic inequalities and to the establishment of more equal communities. The role of communication towards community health is very important, not only because it allows the diffusion of persuasive and educative messages but also for its agenda-setting process, defined by the media.

The role of health organizations in leading these communication efforts has been stronger in the past few years, due to the use of marketing and public relations strategies. Both public institutions and private health companies have been trying to interfere in the public's decision-making process, through publicity, merchandising or press office techniques. While publicity and merchandising techniques explore the advantages of a direct relation with the public, press office techniques rely on the media's credibility and quickness of information to pursue institutional or commercial purposes (McAllister 1992; Zook 1994; Miller & Williams 1998).

Taking all this into account, the study of media's impact on health promotion has been growing as a highly valued area within Health Communication (Kreps & Maiback, 2008). Its perspective has made it possible to highlight the world media's importance and ethic responsibility regarding a health communication agenda. Mass media are primary sources of information to populations, and newspapers especially have become credible and reliable sources considered useful by the public when it comes to decision-making (Dutta-Bergman, 2004).

"Health is a very prominent news category, reflecting and informing public discourse. However we know little about the production processes of journalism leading to the health stories we encounter on a daily basis. Such knowledge is crucial for ensuring a vibrant public sphere for health" (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2008: 43).

Health Journalism is another field of research within Health Communication. It includes the newsmaking process, which allows alternative circuits for the dissemination of health information (Briggs & Hallin, 2010). It is worth highlighting the relationship with news sources who supply technical, political and social material useful to newsmaking. Within health, the relationship with news sources is difficult, yet absolutely essential. Health issues, being so complex, require decoding some concepts and ideas and this begins with the news sources relationship.

There are several health news sources, and organized sources - previously mentioned - often use strategic communication techniques to become news promoters (Molotch & Lester, 1974). These techniques include media relations, an area within Public Relations that includes media's interaction and is meant to promote the publishing of news stories on a company or institution; and media advocacy, which means the mass media's strategic use to promote health policies approval (Freimuth & Quinn, 2004).

The study of health news is of the utmost importance, since it can lead both journalists and health promoters to understand their activities as part of a bigger project, meaning the protection of value within health information and education. This is also true when it comes to private organizations, as the pharmaceutical companies we are now studying.

2.2. *Pharmaceutical industry*

The world pharmaceutical industry has been under structural changes over the past two decades, mostly due to globalization. There is a lot of pressure on these companies, either because of the need of constant technological innovation or the social critique regarding their high profits (Lima & Filho, 2009). Nonetheless, this is a powerful sector held by big multinational companies with an oligopoly power that may prevent new companies from entering the market and also make it difficult for small companies to survive.

In the decade of 1990 we began to witness a series of fusions and purchases of big laboratories and this trend is still a reality. Companies need to invest in research and development (R&D), and this process of aggregation gives place to a highly competitive market between multinational mega-laboratories.

Furthermore, the 1990's were also a time of social and political changes that influenced the competition environment and sector regulation. Consumers' defense organizations started questioning high prices, the first generic drugs were created and competition grew bigger. It was the beginning of regulation by public institutions, regarding R&D activities. It was also the beginning of businesses like big companies with high negotiation power in buying drugs to resell them to governments, hospitals, pharmacies and other health sector agents. All this led to the adoption of new communication and commercialization strategies, targeted at specific markets and therapeutic classes (Bornes, 2012).

Nowadays, the pharmaceutical industry experiences a period of expansion and huge power. It is a prestigious segment of the world economy that has been placing itself both commercially and institutionally as an educator of health aware citizens and as a promoter of people's quality of life.

However, in developing this two-sided commercial and institutional role, this industry is facing strong obstacles in communicating with the public. In Portugal, the law that regulates the "Medication Status" has established that it is forbidden to advertise for prescription drugs. As a consequence, pharmaceuticals are limited in communicating with their publics, which makes them invest in a relationship between company and health professionals, as well as institutional communication.

Actually, the restrictive legal panorama seems to make the sector rethink its communicational practices, looking for new strategies and tools that may work in managing their brands' reputation. We believe that one of those strategies may be a greater investment in institutional or corporative communication, meaning the development of communication actions that seek to promote the brand-company and, consequently, the brand-product. The brand-product communication limitations may have lead to a bigger investment in institutional brand communication, with the creation of specific departments with an allocated budget and devoted staff (see Rodrigues, 2007 and Bornes, 2012).

So, media relations are important to the pharmaceutical industry as an institutional communication tool which can provide information and reputation through media as reliable intermediates. Through these communicative skills, pharmaceutical companies seek access to the media and, as an extension, to the public, placing themselves in a market an organizational way.

Having confirmed all this in the literature review, we became more and more interested in this issue, especially since the pharmaceutical sector was so under-represented in our news sample. The study of this paradox will be approached further in this paper.

3. Methods

Since we wanted to understand the pharmaceutical industry's press offices, we decided to evaluate the news production between 2008 and 2011. We chose an analysis that makes it possible to combine a multi-method approach, allowing us to obtain a more reliable representation of the object of study. We believe this is a valid option, since methodologies represent a strategic area of dialogue and cooperation due to the association between theoretical concerns and empirical demands (Jensen, 2007). During this research we tried to combine different methods of both collecting and analyzing data, according to facilitation, triangulation and complementary rules. Our goal was to check and validate our results, and also to understand the phenomenon based in different perspectives (Duarte 2009; Igartua & Humanes, 2004; Jensen 2007).

First, we conducted a content analysis of health news articles published by three Portuguese newspapers with different periodicity and editorial criteria: *Público* (daily broadsheet); *Jornal de Notícias* (JN) (daily popular); and

Expresso (weekly broadsheet). This analysis includes a series of variables – theme, news angle, news genre -, but it focuses on news sources. We look into news sources according to the following variables: presence/absence of sources; number of quoted sources; geographical location; gender; sources' identification; status and medical specialty.

Then we deepened this extensive analysis with a study on journalists and news sources' perceptions, through semi-structured interviews. As for news sources, they were selected after looking at the results from the first phase of analysis, and the interviews allow us to deepen the content analysis results.

The methodological approaches chosen obviously have limitations, namely when it comes to the sampling. We are dealing with non-probabilistic sampling of typical cases – regarding the choice of press and also the choice of the newspapers analyzed. When it comes to studying only the press, we now believe that we would have different results should we decide to include other media outlets, like television. But when it comes to the chosen newspapers, it seems to us that the results would not be much different should we decide to include other newspapers.

4. The pharmaceutical industry in the news: discussion of results

We analyzed all health news published by JN, *Público* and *Expresso* from 2008 to 2011. From our corpus, only 289 articles refer to the pharmaceutical sector and only 55 quote pharmaceutical companies. This is only 4.6% of the total of health texts published during that period of analysis.

In this four year period the most covered themes are health policies (32.2%) and health economics (29.1%). The most covered disease is Influenza (54%), yet we are aware this is an exceptional phenomenon – apart from this event, Cancer is always the most covered disease. There are 42.2% of the news quoting four or more sources; news sources are mostly male (44.6%); headlines are negative (46.5%); and the most frequent journalistic genre is news (91%).

When looking only at the pharmaceutical sector presence in our sample (55 news articles), we see the following news sources' frequency distribution (Table 1). If we look into the absolute values of Table 1 (that shows a few pharmaceutical companies and their quotes in the media) and read them in articulation with the previous data, we understand there is a marginal presence

of the pharmaceutical industry. Some companies are only rarely quoted, which seems to point out to the existence of a low profile strategic communication management.

Sources	<i>Público</i>	<i>Expresso</i>	<i>JN</i>	TOTAL
ANF	46	8	38	92
Apifarma	30	7	18	55
Ordem dos Farmacêuticos	23	7	16	46
Apogen	19	6	6	31
Associação das Farmácias Portugal	8	0	6	14
Bial	1	1	9	11
GlaxoSmithKline	6	1	4	11
Pfizer	5	0	1	6
Roche	3	0	3	6
Generis	3	0	0	3
Sanofi-Pasteur	1	1	1	3

Table 1. Presence of the pharmaceutical sector in the sample

Our goal was to understand the way Portuguese pharmaceutical companies develop a low profile Public Relations model. Our hypothesis was that they have a well planned strategic management intentionally aimed at creating and developing a highly controlled and reserved institutional profile focusing the brand-product, instead of focusing on the brand-institution.

A second phase was developed in order to test this hypothesis, and we conducted a content analysis that allowed us to come to some results. When it comes to the pharmaceutical industry spokesperson, this is a job usually done by the company's CEO or other top managers. Only seldom is the spokesperson someone from the press office. As for most common public relations' tools, press releases are on the top of the list, followed by reports/researches, interviews and press conferences.

Regarding relationships with the media, we were able to indentify several strategies, as follow: control (“The pharmaceutical company... has refused to comment...” – *Expresso*, August 2008); secrecy (“Portugal has an antiviral in a secret place” – *Expresso*’s headline, May 2009); opportunism (“The day after the WHO declared Influenza A pandemics... Novartis Swiss pharmaceutical company announced the production of an experimental vaccine...” – *Expresso*, June 2009); market (“First drug 100% developed in Portugal is an antiepileptic” – JN, January 2008); success (“Bial doubles research area” – JN’s headline, February 2008); lobbying (“Pharmaceuticals threaten to fire” – JN, September 2010; “WHO denies having given in when Influenza A pandemics was declared” – *Público*’s headline, January 2010); competition (“The generic drugs’ brand Almus... which is directly controlled by the Portuguese Pharmacies Association, is already selling drugs to Spain...” – *Público*, April 2009); research (“Laboratory prevents rheumatoid arthritis in mice” – *Público*’s headline, May 2012); politics (“Pharmaceutical industry critiques the National Financial Institute for lack of accuracy...” – *Público*’s headline, November 2012); and social awareness (“Pfizer awards...” – *Público*’s headline, November 2012).

The texts’ content analysis confirmed the previous quantitative analysis results: a low profile PR model within Portuguese pharmaceutical industry press offices. Some of the profiles, like secrecy or lobbying activities, also contribute to this situation. Still, it was our intention to go further in confirming this hypothesis. Next step in our approach was to collect perceptions and opinions of the news actors, as the pharmaceuticals communication departments. Our goal was to understand what kind of relationships they maintain with the media, how do they plan their public relation activities, and how do they evaluate the (low) presence of the pharmaceutical industry in the media.

Based on the results from Table 1, we selected the less quoted companies as the ones we wanted to interview. We came down to *Bial* (head of communication); *Pfizer* (communication agency); *Roche* (head of communication); and *Sanofi Pasteur, MSD* (head of communication). As we crossed the results of the interviews with our previous analysis, we confirmed a restrictive communication policy due to legal limitations when it comes to referring and publicizing drugs and due to their dependency from their multinational management. Another reason may be the themes handled, which

need to be taken care of in a careful way due to their social impact. These themes are passed along to the media mainly through press releases focusing scientific advances, health economics or health information and promotion. The interviewees admitted to be aware of the “socially responsible” role of the organizations they represent, and of the role they should play in health promotion and literacy.

One of the most relevant results from this data collecting and analysis was the pharmaceutical industry real coverage in the media. These data were surprising and it forced us to make some methodological adjustments, since the industry’s media coverage proved to be a lot more than we initially had predicted from our corpus. These differences are explained by our option to analyze only the main news section of the selected newspapers, and most of the material on pharmaceutical companies is published in supplements, as the economic supplements. This panorama would not have been corrected should we decide not to triangulate methods, and so our methodological options are reinforced.

As for media relations specifically, we were able to understand a concern towards institutional communication management with the establishment of communication structures that develop tactical and strategic planning. In some cases, pharmaceutical companies chose to hire a communication agency. The media relations policy is built on information anticipation, meaning that they “translate” technical contents and are careful in their regular contact with the media. To do so, they are used to relying on a mix of events and press office tools, as the example of press releases, press conferences (only used in exceptional events) and interviews (seldom). As we already stated, spokespeople are top managers but also specialists who sometimes rely on media training approaches.

As for the relationship with the media, interviewees considered it is generally positive although they pointed out some less positive sides. They suggest there is some prejudice towards the pharmaceutical industry and the promotion of both the company and the product. They also referred media’s lack of expertise in covering pharmaceutical issues, yet they evaluate their relationship with the media as positive and professional, marked by accuracy and transparency and a continuous contact with health reporters.

We analyzed and evaluated the pharmaceutical companies' attitude towards the media and its coverage. The results of our research seem to indicate that the newsmaking process is actually based on the relationship – and communication - between health reporters and news sources within a specific sector.

Unlike what we were previously expecting, pharmaceutical companies do not have a marginal presence in the media. However, they show a public relations model that perhaps needs to be rebuilt taking into account the growing demands of public opinion towards companies. The public, being more aware, is concerned with companies' social responsibility but also with the media's responsibility as news promoters, being a part of citizens decision-making process.

5. Clues to a Health Public Relations model

Grounded in this research and comparing it to the results of other studies we conducted in this sector's institutions (Ruão *et al.*, 2012), it is our belief that we can deliver a model profile of media's relationship in Portugal. One can say that usually public relations models adopted by health organizations are divided into Influence Model (Bauer, 1964) and Public Information Model (Grunig & Hunt, 1894). The first one is typical within private organizations, mainly large dimension companies with economic power and business in social awareness areas. These organizations usually have low profile PR models, which means that they develop a strategic press aide, which constitutes part of a more embracing process of communication management; that they plan their access to the media according to properly identified and pondered communication goals; that they measure, evaluate and rigorously control their presence in the national and international media; and that they intend, through press aide activities, to influence media audiences decisions, to build and maintain their institutional brand, to promote a positive image; and to develop a favorable reputation.

The Public Information Model is more associated with public institutions with management responsibilities that operate in the health sector. These institutions follow a high profile PR model, characterized by press aide activities of

information management, proactive attitude and constant interventions. Their reactions are fast and precise (yet sometimes disarticulated) and they look into disseminating information and gather support and goodwill for their causes and initiatives, as well as building a reputation.

We are facing a health media environment with reporters and organized news sources who rely on different PR approaches. This influences the type of information the public has access to, and consequently influences public health promotion. Therefore, we have come to develop a third PR model that is a combination of both Influence and Public Information models and may be more adequate to face today's demands: it is an "accountable media relations model".

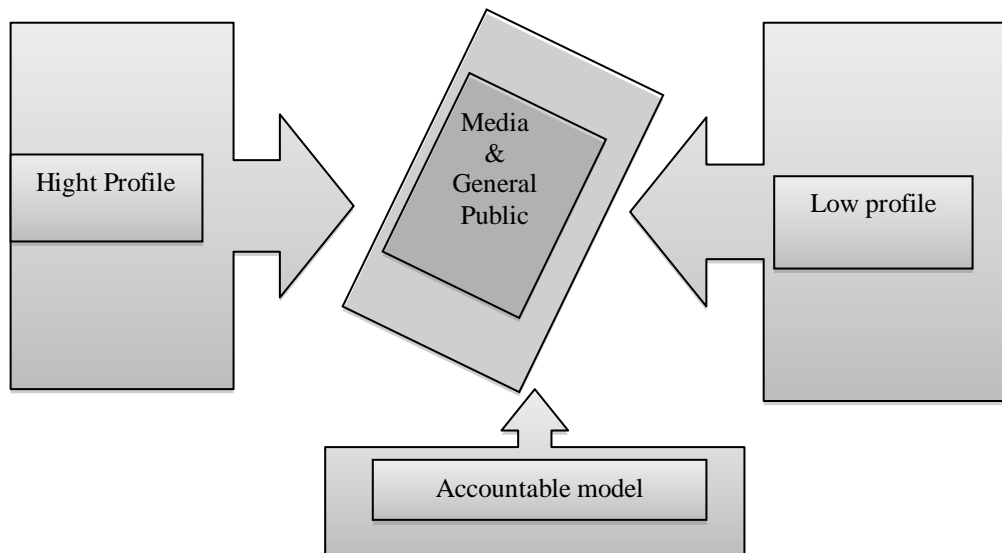


Image 1. Health PR Models

The "accountable" axis in health PR is based on the premise that the classic sending of information to the media needs to be replaced by a more cooperative PR model that positively influences the delivery of healthcare to populations. This model should be grounded in communication management practices and it should aim for the delivery of information on relevant themes. One of the goals is to persuade, through dialogues with media professionals, and "translate" contents in order to make them more accessible to the public. This is only a smaller part of a broader social responsibility sense and we alert to the need of monitoring results as a way of improving the work's quality.

All summed up, the records in reality provided by the media are complex constructions which embody the work of two main groups: news sources and journalists. A joint work by these two agents is important, especially in the health field where a lack of accuracy may cause more harm than in other fields of expertise, and we reinforce that the research in this area is extremely important and socially relevant.

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