

Reporting on Health Issues: Communicating Public Health through the Press in Time of Crisis

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Abstract

Concern for public health is considered to be of crucial societal value for the national policy of every democratic government. As usually happens, the status and changes to social policy may be widely communicated by the media in every country in various ways, either in favor of or against government planning, depending on different factors. Such media saturation can result in deep concern in the area of health issues. Add the current economic crisis, especially as depicted in certain countries of Southern Europe, to such concerns, and reporting on health issues becomes an interesting challenge for the media outlets in these countries. This paper presents a comparative study concerning the press coverage of health issues in the Republic of Cyprus. The study is divided in two parts; the first part was conducted before and the second part after the banking crisis became evident in the local society. The aim of this paper is to examine whether health reporting in the national press was altered after the crisis, and, if so, in which ways.

Key Words: press, mass media, health communication, health issues, economic crisis

Introduction

Media analysts would argue that mass media in general tend to be the biggest educators, entertainers as well as influential factors upon citizens of every age in modern societies (Davies, 1993: S-28). Assuming this to be indeed the case, media saturation with public health issues can be a cause for deep social concern. The challenge of detailing these issues is compounded by the need to report on the current economic crisis, especially as done in certain countries of Southern Europe.

This paper presents a comparative study concerning the press coverage of health issues in the Republic of Cyprus. The study is divided in two parts; the first part was conducted before 2012, and the second part after the banking crisis became evident in the local society (March 2013). The aim of the comparison is to establish whether health reporting was altered due to the crisis, and, if so, in which ways. It formulates the first part of a broader research project, based on both quantitative and qualitative Formal Content research, concerning the framing of health issues in the Greek-Cypriot press. As such, this work is still exploratory but the author believes that the conclusions reached are safe and of scientific interest.

Media Framing of Health Issues

Democratic governments seem to place considerable societal value on issues of public health

when formulating their national social policies. From obesity and steroids, to anti-smoking campaigns and AIDS prevention, public health concerns provide opportunities for introducing and integrating media literacy skills into both health education and the public discourse. Thus, media command substantial power in setting agendas and highlighting both to the public and governments the areas they should be concerned with and/or take action on (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

A great amount of research has focused on how the media frame health related issues. Media framing effects are defined as the ways in which '*events and issues are packaged and presented by journalists*' that '*fundamentally affect how readers and viewers understand those events and issues*' (Price et al, 1997: 495-496). However, the strength of those effects and the exact mechanisms by which the media influence the public's attitudes, opinions and processes of making meaning have been subject to much scholarly debate since the turn of the last century (Scheufele, 1999). Effectively framing the message is key to using media to advance public health issues, since framing provides the context that shapes how the message is understood and how the facts and scientific data presented are interpreted (Brunner et al, 2011).

Scholars agree that '*framing constitutes a form of bias – a process of selection and exclusion*' (Zakakis et al, 2012: 450). In fact, according to Goffman, through framing, audiences '*locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences*

defined in its limits' (Goffman, 1974: 21). Furthermore, Reese explains that '*framing is concerned with the way interests, communicators, sources, and culture, combine to yield organized ways of understanding the world*' (Reese, 2001:11). Recent work on the public's reception of media messages recognizes that the effect of media frames in determining public thinking about social issues is not unidirectional, rejecting in this way the determinism of early studies of mass communication. As current researchers argue, the relationship between the media and the public is now theorized as '*dialectical, dynamic and socially situated*' (O' Neil et al, 2009: 7).

In this perspective, it is recognized by researchers that mass media, and especially the traditional components of print, television and radio, in many ways constitute a poor vehicle for the communication of scientifically accurate information about health, as framing makes them prone to sensationalism, sins of omission and even sheer inaccuracy (Leask et al, 2010). However, it has to be taken under consideration that health professionals and journalists have different values and goals and that argument can result in different concepts of validity and significance between them (Kline, 2006). For example, journalists tend to rely on expert testimony than publications and emphasize controversy rather than consensus (Nelkin, 1997). Consequently, it is difficult for health professionals and journalists to agree on similar norms for the coverage of health issues. If health professionals could develop an understanding of the way mass media operate in general and how health issues are constructed within the media environment, public health could have a more productive engagement within this environment (Leask et al, 2010).

In other words, the role of the media in health policy is not substantially different from their role in foreign policy or labor policy. For some scholars all-powerful media essentially set the governmental agenda, while for others press coverage simply moves higher on the agenda an issue already growing. Some scholars argue that media sensationalism often pushes the government into bad policies, and still others argue that by ignoring a vital health problem, media allow the government to ignore it as well (Otten, 1992).

Health Issues in the Greek-Cypriot Press: Peculiarities and general trends

The Republic of Cyprus is a small island nation in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, a member of the UN since 1960 and a member of the European Union since 2004. The majority of its population is of Greek origin, although other large ethnic

groups are found on the island, including Cypriots of Turkish, Armenian, Latin and other Catholic descent,¹ as well as large communities of European and non-European citizens. The island was divided in 1974, following political events that led to its invasion by Turkish military forces, the occupation of the northern section of the island by these, and the splitting of the population with Turkish-Cypriots in the north and the rest in the south (Photiou & Maniou, 2014). The splitting of the two communities also resulted in the formation of the two separate political identities in the south and the north, the Greek-Cypriots and the Turkish-Cypriots, respectively; for the first ones the model state is considered to be Greece, while for the second it is Turkey (Roussou, 2005: 10).

In Cyprus, and in other countries where the traditional element is strong and has played a crucial role in structuring current societal trends, there are individuals who feel it imperative to seek their roots and origin in their rich folklore and cultural past, the pillar of their present, future and the evidence of their identity (Menelaou, 2011: 26). Accordingly, in such countries, identity (national, political and/or other) plays a key role for the media choices of the individual (Maniou, 2013: 55-57).

As a result, the media landscape of Cyprus was formatted after 1974 based on the specific political norms that pre-occupy the Cypriot public sphere. The Greek-Cypriot press in its day-to-day coverage of health issues was – and still is – referring to issues related to the Greek-Cypriot community, while health issues occurring in the northern part of the island are presented as distinguished stories concerning the Turkish-Cypriot community. Since no official data is available for the Northern part of the island, comparisons of health data in the press are not available.

Furthermore, the period that followed the negotiations for the bail-out of the Greek-Cypriot banking system in March 2013, decisively altered the way reporting in public affairs has been appearing in the country's newspapers, since issues related to the economic crisis have since been at the top of the press agenda and everything else follows. The negotiations were accompanied by austerity measures which, together with the banking and national debts, have decisively affected all aspects of the local society

¹ Although statistics regarding the ethnicity of the population in Cyprus have been a bit sketchy since the Turkish Invasion of 1974, at that time it was estimated that 85% of the population were of Greek-Cypriot origin, 12% were Turkish-Cypriots, and the Armenian, Latin and other Catholic groups comprised the remaining 3% of the population (National Statistical Agency).

(political, economic, social, cultural, etc.). During the economic downturn, the link between recession and health has featured in the media debate of many countries (Jenkins et al, 2009). As it was expected, issues concerning social responsibility of the state regarding public health became a favourite topic. Additionally, although newspaper columns regarding health issues did not decrease, the shrinking of the editorial team in every newspaper and, also, the reduction of pages resulted in many cases in the alteration of the newspapers' journalistic content. This study is going to examine the ways in which health reporting in the press was transformed due to the economic crisis in Cyprus.

The Research

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this paper is to present a comparative study concerning health reporting in the Greek-Cypriot press, before and after the onset of the economic crisis. The first part of the research was conducted during October 2012, the period before the banking crisis became evident in the local society. The second part of the research was conducted during October 2013, after the March 2013 negotiations for the bail-out for the banking sector, when the impacts of the economic crisis on several aspects of everyday life for (at least) the Greek-Cypriot community were clearly evident and vigorously reported on.

The research questions (RQs) for this study are the following:

1. Has the economic crisis affected the amount of health reporting presented in the Greek-Cypriot press?
2. Has the economic crisis affected the way(s) health reporting is presented in the Greek-Cypriot press?
3. Has the economic crisis affected the way health reporting is presented in newspapers of different political affiliations, and, if so, in which ways?

Based on the above RQs, the analysis that follows is an attempt to reach safe conclusions regarding health reporting in the Republic of Cyprus, through the comparison of the findings in the two aforementioned

periods of time.

Research Methodology and sample

The research is based on both quantitative and qualitative Formal Content research analysis of the news items (reportages), including assorted elements (photographs, figures, etc.), in which a systematic sample of texts is used and classification systems are devised to identify different features of the texts, which are then counted with an emphasis on objectivity and reliability (Pawson, 1995). The data reported in this article derive from quantitative and qualitative news content analysis of the national Greek-Cypriot written press of October 2012 and October 2013. This specific month was selected as it offers a 'safe' time space from March 2013 (six months before and six month after), when the debt of major Cypriot banks and their financial bail-out led to the culmination of the economic crisis in Cyprus. The unit of analysis was the news item. A news item was understood as the group of continuous verbal and visual elements that refer to the same topic (Mellado & Lagos, 2014: 2095).

In both parts of the research, three specific newspapers were selected and the sample consists of all the news items referring to health issues in these papers using the key-word 'health': the first newspaper was *Fileleftheros*, the top mainstream newspaper in circulation in the country; the second one was *Haravgi*, the top newspaper with a left-wing affiliation in circulation; and the third one was *Simerini*, the top newspaper in circulation in the country with a right-wing affiliation. These national newspapers are considered significant gatekeepers, since not only do they enjoy wide readership, but also they tend to influence news content in other media forms (i.e., Internet, television, radio) in the form of inter-media agenda setting (Danielian and Reese, 1989).

There were no selection criteria concerning the format or the presentation of the news items, since the basic aim of the research was to examine as many items as possible concerning health, even the ones with a remote connection to this thematic area. However, the sample of the news items examined does not include commentaries, features or chronicles and it is strictly confined to journalistic reportages. The final sample consists of a total of 527 items, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1 The sample of the research

Newspaper	<i>Phileleftheros</i>	<i>Haravgi</i>	<i>Simerini</i>	Total number of news items
October 2012	120	106	58	284
October 2013	112	73	58	243
Total number of news items	232	179	116	527

Three independent coders were trained in the process of applying a common codebook, while – prior to the main research – a different coder test was administered, so as to ensure that they had a similar understanding of the codebook variables (Mellado & Lagos, 2014: 2095-2096). During the pre-test survey, overall inter-coder reliability was estimated at 0.89, using Krippendorff's alpha formula. For the statistical analysis of the results of the main study and the correlations that came up, a p value of 0.05 was set as the limit of significance.

Description of the variables

In order to fulfill the aims of this study, six different categories of variables were selected which operated as indicators representing different thematic issues within the broader area of health issues, on a presence-absence basis. These indicators were:

1. *'Positive governmental measures for the health sector'*: This category includes all news items referring to reportages (news items) concerning governmental announcements that favor the health sector and social health policy (e.g., more funding for health, the appointing of committees for safeguarding quality of services in national hospitals, etc.).

2. *'New discoveries in the health sector'*: This category includes all news items referring to discoveries that derive from academic or medical research and significantly contribute in curing disease (e.g., a new medicine that can assist people with diabetes, a new blood test that can help predict cancer, etc.).

3. *'Political conflicts for health issues and policy'*: This category includes all news items referring to conflicts between political parties and/or independent politicians concerning issues of health (e.g., the opposition party denounces the government for increasing hospital fees, a verbal debate between representatives of different political parties in the House of Parliament during the discussion of a new law for the health sector, etc.).

4. *'Problems with the health infrastructure'*: This category includes all news items referring to problems that affect health infrastructure (e.g., one of the national hospitals is incapable of performing brain surgery due to

the lack of the adequate equipment, the decrease in health funds has caused national hospitals to delay replacing medical equipment, etc.).

5. *'Mental health issues'*: This category includes all news items referring to mental health issues, both in Cyprus and abroad (e.g., the increase/decrease of mental diseases, social bias for the mentally diseased, etc.).

6. *'Other articles'*: This category includes all news items that cannot be categorized in any other variable/indicator and, therefore, they do not – for the moment – present any interest in the first part of this research.

Research Findings

As the research has shown, reporting on health issues not only did not increase after the economic crisis became evident in the local society, but, contrary to the case of other countries, the number of relevant stories in the newspapers slightly decreased, as depicted in Figure 2 (October 2012: $t = 5.38$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.033$ – October 2013: $t = 5.03$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.037$).

In fact, the economic crisis seems to have affected the content of health reporting, since there are significant differences between pre- and post-crisis eras in all three newspapers in every category of variables/indicators. In particular, *Fileleftheros* in October 2012 offered to its readers 9 articles concerning positive measures in health provided by the government, 20 articles concerning new discoveries in the health sector, 8 articles concerning political conflicts for health issues, 11 articles referring to problems with health infrastructure and 11 articles referring to mental health issues, as presented in Table 2. The numbers in every category decreased in 2013, besides the category "problems with health infrastructure", which increased, while the statistical analysis shows that there is significant difference ($t = 29$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.02$). It has to be noted that from the 67 articles referring to other health issues in 2013, 11 articles were referring to the economic crisis and its effects upon health issues. In fact, all these 11 articles included the word "crisis" in the title of the article.

Table 2 Articles in the newspaper Fileleftheros

	Positive governmental measures	New discoveries	Political conflicts for health	Problems with the health infrastructure	Mental health	Other articles
October 2012	9	20	8	11	11	61
October 2013	6	5	8	19	7	67

The newspaper *Simerini* presented a different picture of health issues than *Phileleftheros*, since in 2012, 5 articles were referring to positive governmental measures, 6 were referring to new discoveries, 9 to political conflicts for health issues, 4 to problems with health infrastructure and five to mental health issues, as depicted in Table 3. In 2013 the numbers in all but one categories decreased; the exception was the category

“new discoveries”, for which articles increased (M = 58, SD = 0). Out of 34 articles referring to other health issues in 2013, 3 articles were referring to the economic crisis and its effects upon health issues. In fact, all these 3 articles included the word “crisis” in the title of the article.

Table 3 Articles in the newspaper Simerini

	Positive governmental measures	New discoveries	Political conflicts for health	Problems with health infrastructure	Mental health	Other articles
October 2012	5	6	9	4	5	29
October 2013	2	13	4	3	2	34

On the other hand, *Haravgi* presented a completely different picture of health issues in Cyprus than *Simerini*. In October 2012, 10 articles were referring to positive governmental measures in the health sector, 16 to new discoveries in the health industry, 5 articles to political conflicts concerning health, 4 articles to problems with health infrastructure and 6 articles were referring to mental health issues. In 2013, the numbers in every category decreased, besides the categories

“problems with health infrastructure” and “mental health”, which increased as depicted in Table 4, while the statistical analysis showed that there is no significant difference ($t = 5.42$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.116$). Among the 46 articles referring to other health issues in 2013, only 2 articles were referring to the economic crisis and its effects upon health issues. Both these articles included the word “crisis” in the title of the article.

Table 4 Articles in the newspaper Haravgi.

	Positive governmental measures	New discoveries	Political conflicts for health	Problems with health infrastructure	Mental health	Other articles
October 2012	10	16	5	4	6	65
October 2013	2	3	2	6	13	46

Special mention should be made to the elements accompanying health articles in the newspapers, like photographs or data charts and figures. As far as photographs are concerned, this study showed a significant increase in the number of photographs used in every paper between 2012 and 2013. Specifically, two out of the three newspapers (*Phileleftheros* and *Haravgi*) almost doubled the number of photographs they published within this period of time regarding health issues. A close examination of these photographs in 2013, however, proves that most of them were archive

photos, neither directly relevant to the article nor taken at the actual time of the event, but rather used in order to cover more space in the newspaper. Additionally, while in 2012 the newspapers would publish three or four articles concerning health issues in one page, in 2013 the relevant page for health issues would present only two articles, accompanied by more photographs. It becomes evident that the lack of rich content (reportages) and the increase of photographs can be connected to the shrinking of the editorial team, due to the economic crisis.

Table 5 Articles including photographs

	Phileleftheros	Haravgi	Simerini	Total
October 2012	45	61	23	129
October 2013	72	65	42	179
Total	117	126	65	308

Furthermore, numerical or statistical data concerning health issues are completely missing from the articles in all three papers examined. The only numerical data appearing (both in the titles and within the story) mainly concern the amount of money spent by the government in the health sector, e.g., “320.000 Euros paid to mediators for sending patients in Israel” (*Haravgi*, 9 October 2013, p.11), or, “58 million Euros less for the health sector this year” (*Fileleftheros*, 18 October 2013, p.12).

Discussion – Limitations

As the research data have shown, the three newspapers selected for this study presented a different image of health issues in Cyprus, both before (2012) and also after (2013) the onset of the economic crisis in the local society. The top mainstream newspaper in circulation, *Fileleftheros*, in 2012 emphasized new developments in the health industry (20 news items), with the problems in health infrastructure coming second (11 news items). All the news items with hits in the front page of the newspaper were mainly deriving from these two categories. The situation altered in 2013, since at that period the two categories with higher number of articles concerning health issues were “problems with health infrastructure” (19 news items) and news items concerning the effects of the economic crisis on the health sector (11 articles). For example, titles like “Doctors prescribe medicine in the hospital corridors due to the lack of infrastructure” (*Fileleftheros*, 4 October 2013, p.16), often made it to the front page, framing as the most important issue for the health sector in Cyprus the lack of adequate infrastructure. More often, titles like “Due to the crisis, 36 million Euros deductions in the health sector” (*Fileleftheros*, 9 October 2013, p.18) tended to frame the economic crisis as the key element for all the problems in the health sector of the country.

It has to be taken under consideration that until the early months of 2013, Cyprus had a left government, while in February 2013 the presidential elections were won by the right-conservative candidate and the government changed from left- to right-wing.

In this perspective, the top right-wing newspaper in circulation, *Simerini*, in 2012 emphasized news items concerning political conflicts for health (9 news items) and those focusing on new discoveries in the health sector (6 news items). For example, news items like “Political conflicts for the price of medication: The government refuses to answer” (*Simerini*, 16 October 2012, p.6), very often made the front page of the newspaper. After the right-conservative party came to power in 2013, the paper increased the articles concerning new discoveries (13 news items), possibly in an effort to create a positive news environment in a time

of crisis, e.g., “New scientific achievements lead the way for curing Alzheimer” (*Simerini*, 12 October 2013, p.31). Additionally, *Simerini* reduced by 50% the number of articles concerning political conflicts in the health sector (9 news items in October 2012 – 4 articles in October 2013), while only 3 news items in October 2013 concerning health included the word “crisis” in their titles.

On the other hand, *Haravgi*, the top left-wing newspaper in circulation presented a different framing of health issues for its readers. During October 2012, the paper gave emphasis to articles concerning new discoveries in the health sector (16 news items) and positive governmental measures for health (10 news items). For example, articles like “There is no future for private hospitals: Public hospitals lead the way” (*Haravgi*, 12 October 2012, p.11), and, “A.Agrotou, Minister for Health, is fighting against the problems in the health sector” (*Haravgi*, 21 October 2012, p.7), often made the front page of the newspaper. In this way, health issues were framed in a positive way for the left-wing government. However, in October 2013, as the research shows, *Haravgi* decisively altered its framing of health issues. At that point, the paper increased news items concerning problems in health infrastructure (6 news items), while the number of news items concerning mental health problems due to the economic crisis increased by 55% (13 news items in October 2013). For example, the readers of *Haravgi* very often read reportages like “Chaotic situation in the public hospital of Larnaca” (*Haravgi*, 4 October 2013, p.12), or, “Chaotic situation in the departments of blood transfusion in public hospitals around Cyprus” (*Haravgi*, 25 October 2013, p.10).

Finally, the study did not locate any news items in October 2013 referring to Turkish-Cypriot health issues, while only one news item in October 2012 was located in *Fileleftheros* (“Turkish-Cypriots can be hospitalized with no fees”, 17 October, p.20). This finding indicates that there is almost a complete absence of any “Other” identity in the Greek-Cypriot press.

Conclusions

After the above analysis, it is safe to conclude that the economic crisis has indeed affected the communication of health issues through the press.

First (RQ1), the amount of health reporting in the Greek-Cypriot press has decreased during the economic crisis, since there are currently less articles concerning health issues. In addition, photographs included in the articles have increased after the economic crisis without always being necessary; on the contrary, it is found that a significant number of photographs are retrieved from press archives and aim to fill the “gap” within the newspapers’ pages that is

created by the shrinking of their experienced editorial teams.

Secondly (RQ2), the economic crisis seems to have also affected the way health issues are communicated via the press, since the framing of these issues has been altered. Several factors can result in this situation, with the most important one being the newspapers' political affiliation and party politics in relation to the government in office, for every period of time.

Finally (RQ3), as seen above, the right-wing newspaper presented different results than the left-wing newspaper. However, both of these newspapers failed to meet the statistically important criteria, indicating that the partisan policy of the press was not altered before and after the economic crisis. In this perspective, this study has shown that right-wing and left-wing newspapers' framing of health issues is mainly influenced by each newspaper's ideological orientation and depends on the affiliation of the government in office. Of course this is not a new finding for the international academic community. This study verifies that right-wing newspapers tend to communicate more often health issues in favor of the conservative party, when this is in power, while reinforcing images of political conflict and debate, when the opposing party is in office. On the other hand, left-wing newspapers tend to communicate more often issues concerning public health funds, when the left party is in office, while articulating images of public debate when this party serves in the opposition. In both cases, issues concerning new achievements in the health sector are widely communicated in order to form an optimistic public discourse in time of crisis. However, what can be seen as a new finding deriving from this study is that the economic crisis seems to be offering a new vehicle for the partisan press, since health issues

are now presented in the general context of the economic regression.

The economic crisis has significantly affected the mainstream newspapers, since the way health issues were communicated in 2013 tended to frame the crisis as the key element for all the problems in the health sector of the country. Despite the fact that problems in the health sector used to appear even before the economic regression (i.e., lack in health infrastructure or conflicts regarding health measurements), the crisis seems to have offered the mainstream press a new vehicle for adding sensationalism and forming impressive news titles that can attract larger readership.

In any case, reporting on health issues for the Greek-Cypriot press remains a strictly insular procedure, since images, issues or figures concerning the Turkish-Cypriot community are almost completely missing. Finally, although health reporting offers a wide platform for scientific data usage in order to make the communicated message more appealing and articulated for the public, this kind of data are almost never utilized by the press. The question that arises is whether there is indeed a lack of official health data in the country or whether journalists do not tend to incorporate them into their articles.

Considering the evolution of this project, further research could focus on the way the public perceives the frames of health issues in the press, raising the question whether media are used in order to advance public health agendas or whether these agendas are used by the media so as to form new public discourses, either in favor of the government or against it, whichever is applicable in every case.

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