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How does media coverage effect the consumption of antidepressants? A study of the media coverage of antidepressants in Danish online newspapers 2010–2011

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ABSTRACT

Background: The news media has become a major source of health information for the public, and hence vital in the individuals' opinions and decisions about health topics. The first decrease in the usage of antidepressants in Denmark in over a decade happened alongside an intensive period of media coverage about antidepressants.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to examine the Danish media's coverage of antidepressants during 2010–2011 in order to explore what influence it could have had on the change in the use of antidepressants.

Methods: Three media theoretical concepts, agenda-setting, priming and framing, were used to explain the media influence with regard to which subject the public should think about, which criteria the public should judge the subject by, and how the public should think about the subject.

All articles about antidepressants in the main Danish Internet newspapers from 2010–2011 were analyzed via quantitative and qualitative content analyses. The quantitative analysis was used to determine *agenda-setting* (number of articles) and, by coding articles, how *priming* was used in the descriptions of antidepressants. In the qualitative analysis, all articles were analyzed and condensed to determine which *frames* were used.

Results: Quantitative results: 271 articles were included. Agenda-setting was shown by a marked increase in the number of articles about antidepressants. Eight main codes were identified, with the negatively-associated side effects being the major one, thereby priming the public to use side effects as a criterion when judging antidepressants. Qualitative results: Two main frames were identified: 1) economic profits vs. medicine safety, and 2) the necessity of antidepressants. Both frames presented a critical view on antidepressants.

Conclusion: It is believed that the media's *agenda-setting*, *priming* and *framing* of antidepressants led the public to have a more skeptical view on antidepressants, which may have probably contributed to a decrease in the usage of antidepressants.

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1. Introduction

The news media has become a major source of health information for the public, and it is therefore vital in forming the individuals' opinions and decisions about health topics.¹ For example, more than half of the population of the United States describes the news media as their most important source of health information.¹

Furthermore, in situations in which there is uncertainty about a health or medical issue, both the public and health providers will look to the media to flag potential problems.^{1,2} Studies have documented that media coverage (in combination with regulatory interventions) of health and medical issues can impact medical decisions, health service utilization, and the sales pattern of pharmaceutical products.^{3,4} In 2012, Hernandez et al.² showed that a temporal decrease in Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) users in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were associated with a combined effect of media coverage and regulatory warnings. Williams et al.⁵ (2000) showed that the decrease in the prescription

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of Cotrimoxazole in Ireland occurred when the media reported negative effects about the drug. The latter media coverage occurred approximately a year before the authorities made an official change in its recommendation about the drug. Williams et al. therefore argued that the “*media in many cases appears to have a greater effect than information provided by regulatory authorities.*”⁵

Depression is the leading cause of *Years Lost to Disability*. It is estimated by The World Health Organization to affect 350 million people globally, and hence has a huge impact on both the affected individuals and the society.^{6,7} Studies have shown that in people with their first depressive episode 15% will develop chronic depression, 35% will overcome the first episode but later experience another depressive episode, while 50% will recover and never experience a depressive episode again.⁸ From both the individual and society perspectives, it is important that persons suffering from depression receive the proper treatment. However even though treatment is possible, the Danish Health Agency estimates that 50% of depressed people in Denmark never receive treatment.⁹ Antidepressants are one of three main treatment possibilities for dealing with depression, with psychological help and Electro Convulsive Therapy being the other two treatment possibilities.⁹

The effect of antidepressants is debated. Studies have generally found an increasing effect correlating to the severity of depression. A meta-analysis of 6 studies found the effect in mild to moderate depression low to non-existent, while the effect in patients with major depression was significant.¹⁰ An analysis assessing 93 placebo controlled studies only found a higher effect of antidepressants compared to placebo in 48% of the study population.¹¹

SSRIs and tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs) are the recommended antidepressant groups for treating moderate and severe depression in Denmark; both have serious side-effects. For SSRI the side-effects include sexual-dysfunction, nausea, diarrhea, anorexia and sedation. It has also been documented that the use of SSRIs can increase the risk of suicide. The most common side effects of TCAs include mouth dryness, blurred vision, constipation and urinary retention, weight gain and sexual dysfunction.^{12,13} When stopping the treatment of both SSRIs and TCAs, the use should be reduced slowly over several weeks to avoid withdrawal symptoms in the form of vertigo, nausea, weakness, insomnia, anxiety, irritability and headache.¹²

The first decrease in the usage of antidepressants in over a decade in Denmark began alongside an increase in the media coverage of antidepressants (Fig. 1).^{14,15} Two peaks can be seen in the media coverage: one in 2010–2011 and one in 2013. The decrease in the use of antidepressants starts shortly before the first peak, and continues during and after the two media coverage peaks. Therefore it is hypothesized that the intensive media

coverage could be a contributor to the decrease in antidepressant usage. The aim of this study was hence to examine the Danish media's coverage of antidepressants during 2010–2011 in order to explore what influence it could have had on the change in use of antidepressants.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Three individual, but interconnected, theories were used to analyze the data in this study, in order to understand the mechanisms behind the effect of the media coverage on the use of antidepressants. The first of these is *agenda-setting*. *Agenda-setting* was first described in 1922 and refers to the theory that humans do not only react to the actual society, but to the pseudo-society which is created by the media.¹⁶ A quote by Luhmann captures the essence of *agenda-setting*:

*“Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media.”*¹⁶

This quote refers to the fact that the media does not fully reflect reality; the media filter and shape it, by for example concentrating on a few issues and subjects, which leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.¹⁷ There are of course other ways of obtaining knowledge than from media, for example personal knowledge of an issue, however the media does have an important and critical role in describing the society and hence our perception of it.

McCombs and Shaw were the first to experimentally document the effect of *agenda-setting*.¹⁷ They found a correlation between the subjects most mentioned in the media during a presidential campaign in United States, and the subjects to whom the voters attributed the most importance:

*“[Mass media] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”*¹⁷

The media has an *agenda-setting* effect, because they can highlight one subject by increasing its visibility. The amount of media coverage of a subject therefore determines how important it will be in the population.¹⁷

As seen in Fig. 1, the media published more articles about antidepressants during some years compared to others, thus setting the *agenda* and making the public view antidepressants as an important subject in those periods of time.

In 1972 *priming* was defined by Lyengar et al.¹⁸ who showed that the media can affect which criteria the individual will judge a subject by. They did this by showing that the media could affect from which criteria the American voters would evaluate their presidential candidates. In a study the control group was shown unedited TV-News, while the test group was shown the same TV-News that also contained extra features about civil rights and unemployment. Afterwards the test group, when evaluating the presidential candidate, put a higher emphasis on civil rights and unemployment than the control group did.¹⁸ *Priming* is defined as:

*“The effects of a prior context on the interpretation and retrieval of information.”*¹⁸

By ignoring or emphasizing certain aspects, the media affects which criteria the population will use when they are evaluating a subject. This creates a foundation by which they can affect the population's opinions and behaviors. *Priming* is often described as a

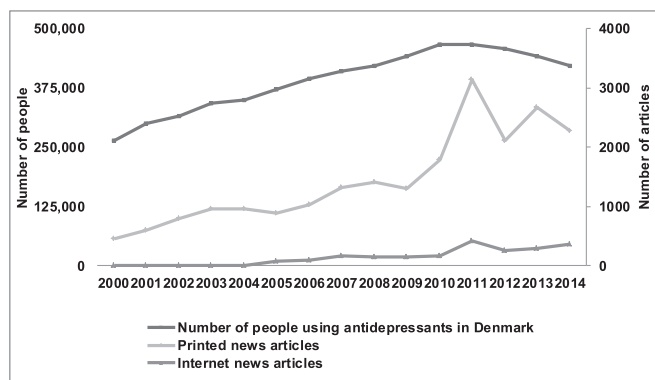


Fig. 1. Number of people using antidepressants from 2000–2014 (measured as number of people collecting at least one prescription in community pharmacies/year)¹⁴ and number of articles about antidepressants published between 1998 and 2014 in the Danish printed and Internet newspapers.¹⁵

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