Perspectives on Improving Nursing's Public Image

*If the news media's projection of nursing's image
is not in the shape nursing wants projected, then where
are the access points to the media and how can the
shape be changed?*

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Half a century ago it may not have been absolutely essential for the general public to be informed about nursing and its implications for health care. Today the situation has so vastly changed that this view no longer holds true. The public is called upon to aid in the decision-making process in health care by voting, organizing and exercising influence on government, at the local, state, and federal levels. They require a certain awareness of nursing activities in order to make intelligent judgements about the expenditure of their tax dollars.

Public funds already pay the lion's share, 40 percent, of health costs nationally, compared to 35 percent by the user and about 25 percent by private insurance plans. This makes the cost of health care not only a private concern but a public one, and increased public financing of health care is leading to governmental action across the nation. Among hospitals, pharmacists and pharmaceutical manufacturers, medical suppliers, and physicians, there is a growing effort toward building better understanding and relationships with consumers. Where there is public spending, there must be public understanding. Obviously, regarding nursing, this cannot be achieved overnight, but nurses must make a beginning in understanding the complexities of communicating information about their work and themselves to the public.

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Need for Nursing's Inclusion in Health Care Reform

To even the casual observer it is increasingly obvious that the United States is in the very early stages of a revolutionary change in its health care delivery system. When a national survey asked, "Which health care system do you think would be the best way to provide adequate medical and health care for all people?" only one American in four, 25 percent, said, "the present system." Just four years earlier, 30 percent spoke up for the present system. The leadership of the traditional health care industry has also drastically declined in public confidence since 1966 according to an annual survey by Louis Harris and Associates (see Table 1).

To most Americans these days, what is changing most in the health care field are costs. For the average urban American, the cost of health care has soared 240 percent since 1968 — faster than any other basic living need, including food, housing, clothing, entertainment, and transportation. One out of every eleven dollars Americans spend today goes for health care. At a time when maintaining a single hospital bed can cost up to $30,000 per year — and when the average cost of a day's stay in the hospital has risen to over $200 from $35 in 1963 — the entire industry is the target of reform.

The progress of health sciences, which offers increasing opportunities for curing diseases and improving health, creates a natural demand for new health care services. Americans want a large and increasing part of these to be provided as a public service, available to all with minimum discrimination due to financial means. Progress in this direction is being made, but the objective has yet to be met to a satisfactory degree. Meanwhile a heavy strain has been placed on both the available services and public treasury, with the cost of health care increasing at a rate which cannot be maintained. In such conditions, politicians are the first to know that the same taxpayers who demand increased

Table 1. Public Confidence in Leaders of Institutions

	1966	1971	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	Percent of Change Since 1966
Medicine	73%	61%	57%	50%	43%	42%	43%	42%	30%	−43
Major companies	55	27	29	21	19	16	20	22	18	−37
Military	62	27	40	33	24	23	27	29	29	−33
Congress	42	19	29	18	13	9	17	10	18	−24
Executive branch	41	23	19	28	13	11	23	14	17	−24
Organized religion	41	27	36	32	32	24	29	34	20	−21
Organized labor	22	14	20	18	14	10	14	15	10	−12
Press	29	18	30	25	26	20	18	23	28	− 1
TV news	25	—	41	31	35	28	28	35	37	+ 12
Average of nine major institutions	43	27	33	28	24	20	24	25	23	−20

Source: Louis Harris & Associates, "Confidence Rollercoaster," PUBLIC OPINION, Vol. 2, Oct-Nov 1970, p. 30.

health care services will not be prepared to foot the growing bill unless they are convinced that, collectively, they are obtaining an appropriately increasing amount of useful service.

The mass media, particularly the various news media, are well aware of this situation and devote an impressive amount of space to the public debate on health care reform. There is no doubt that legislators at all levels, health care administrators, along with health care providers (of which nursing services constitute about 50 percent as depicted in Figure 1) will all be deeply involved in a major reform of the present health care structure under the watchful eye of the much concerned public. Social ideologies will certainly play a role in the search for solutions. However, objective information available to the decision makers is insufficient, especially in relation to the opportunities offered by expanded nursing services and responsibilities.

A greatly enlarged effort is needed to define the ways in which the system for the delivery of health care can be improved. There are basically three problem areas: (1) improvement of health services; (2) rendering their accessibility more equitable; and (3) keeping costs in proper proportion. Nurses can provide much in helping to solve these problems. It is essential, therefore, to consider how public information about nurses and nursing can help in the search for solutions to the problem of improving the delivery of health care as a publicly supported service.

The terms health care and health care delivery mean different things to different people. Nurses use these terms in their broadest meanings to indicate care extending far beyond treatment of sickness, beyond medical care in general. Nurses' definitions of health care are based on a comprehensive definition of health, encompassing not only its physical but also its social and psychological aspects. Health care is, in nursing's view, a whole system of care, designed to promote health, to prevent sickness as well as treat it.

In placing the health care system foremost, with a major emphasis on the promotion of health, nurses do not belittle the importance of continuing service and research in the medical sciences. There is still much need for substantial progress in the biomedical and

Figure 1. Half of all health care personnel provide nursing-related services.

Total: 4.7 million workers
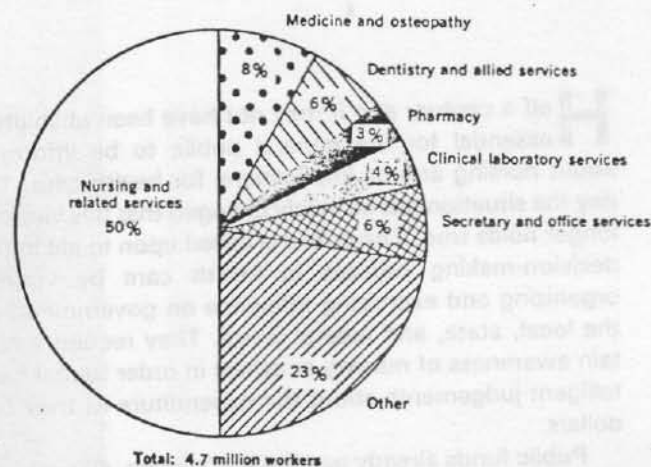
Source: Health Resources Statistics, 1975. Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

allied sciences to bring about effective and economic techniques for cure and prevention which the improved health care system could then deliver. But that is only part of the total health care system, whose purpose, nurses believe, should be to activate all its factors to secure a satisfactory improvement or maintenance of health for the largest possible percentage of the population.

One factor in a good system should be information and guidance for people to participate in their own health care and exercise the options within means of their control. Unfortunately, neither the public nor the public decision makers are fully aware of nurses' perspectives on health care or aware of the nursing alternatives that the nursing profession offers in health care services. Hence, their choices are limited accordingly. The quickest way to create the best options for public decision makers is to provide an open public forum based on accurate and up-to-date information about nurses and nursing. In this way options in health care could be generated, selected, translated into policy, incorporated, and evaluated. Reinhard underlines the importance of informing the public about the need to fully utilize nurses as the most effective way

to enhance the quality of health care in our nation when he suggests that a mass media effort be designed to change prevailing norms about the division of responsibility among health care workers. The assumption is that public resistance to alteration in health care providers' responsibilities might dampen efforts to increase quality through such changes [1].

Power of the News Media in Society

It is important to recognize the significance of modern communications not only as a highly organized system but also as a potent force for social good or possible evil upon the nursing profession. Lasswell conveniently categorizes the functions of the mass media as: (1) surveillance of the environment for the news function of the press; (2) news interpretation and prescriptions for behavior; (3) transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next or the passing down of information, values and social norms to children; and (4) entertainment [2].

Anticipation of interpersonal communication also influences selection of material from the media with consideration of its high social utility in these subsequent conversations.

As Lazarsfeld and Merton have pointed out, the news media can confer status upon issues, persons, organizations, or social movements by singling them out for attention. Audiences apparently subscribe to the circular belief that if something matters, it will be at the focus of mass media attention, and if something is the focus of mass media attention, then it must really matter:

The mass media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status. Recognition by the press testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large, anonymous masses, that one's behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice [3].

The news media — newspapers, television, and news magazines — consistently reaches large audiences. Most major daily newspapers reach from 25 percent to 50 percent of their circulation area's adult population each day. Both morning papers and evening papers, in combination, reach approximately 70 percent of all adults in their areas daily and about 80 percent weekly [4]. Television news also draws a great au-

dience. Sixty percent of all adults watch an early and/or late evening newscast each day, while over 90 percent watch television news over a four-week period. Studies show that the average adult devotes 12 percent of his total television viewing time to news [5].

The third major disseminator of news is the news magazine. In this field three major news weeklies stand out — *Time* (circulation 4,311,000) *Newsweek* (circulation 2,959,000), and *U.S. News* (circulation 2,010,000). Reflecting the public's heightened interest in news, these three news weeklies have registered impressive circulation gains in the 1970s. Partly because of their pass-along readership, these three news weeklies deliver impressive national audiences; 12 percent of all men and 8 percent of all women read one or more of the three news magazines on an average day, while their weekly coverage is estimated at 28 to 30 percent of all men and 12 to 21 percent of all women [6].

Mass media disseminate a prodigious amount of information to their audiences. Early research on cognitive learning from newspapers and television tended to emphasize the learning of facts, but recently social scientists have examined the information acquired from the news media, discovering that facts are only part of what an audience perceives. The news media also dispense values and influence social behavior. A major part of learning social behavior occurs by watching the way other people behave and by imitating the behavior that we believe appropriate to our own identity. One study demonstrates how children change their behavior when they watch models enact more aggressive behavior, for example [7]. Clearly the media offer numerous models, but this is not their only influence on social behavior. A growing body of research indicates a significant impact of television and newspapers on topics of conversation [8]. Conversely, anticipation of interpersonal communication also influences selection of material from the media with consideration of its high social utility in these subsequent conversations. This may be the major impact of the various mass media — as a stimulus for any source of interpersonal conversation. Coupled with television's ability to attract massive audiences, this is a significant social role. One person can have acquaintance, or dealings, with a relatively small number of people; about the other thousands of millions of people he can only make generalizations based on the mass media messages he receives [9].

Relatively little attention has been given news media content as a means of monitoring nursing's professional image, even though the importance of the media in setting the public agenda has drawn increasing attention in recent years.

How Important is Media Access to Nurses?

Access to the media has become very important because the media often serve as intermediaries for nursing interest groups. If nurses lack direct access to government personnel, they face trying to influence government indirectly. The media are important to many indirect influence attempts.

Access to the media as a field for research began with Jerome Barron's seminal article "Access to the News — A New First Amendment Right." In that article, extended later into a book, Barron persuasively argues that denial of access by the media constitutes an abridgement of first amendment rights to disadvantaged groups. Noting that blacks, women, the poor, unpopular political groups, and other marginal groups are often denied access to the media, Barron maintains that a latter 20th century interpretation of freedom of the press mandates full access to the media for all [10].

The very nature of the media sometimes denies these groups access. A number of writers both past and present have pointed out that the media in any society have a function of purveying basic societal values that tend to support existing viewpoints and institutional structures. This tendency to harmonize differences and mold a common outlook is often achieved by not reporting what are perceived as deviant outlooks thereby isolating them from the public discussion agenda. By filtering out the new, the controversial, or the challenging, conflict is dampened and change is slowed.

To date, there is little except anecdotal evidence on the question of whether group affiliation helps one gain access to the media. To examine this question, thirty-four students in several reporting classes were assigned to write a fifteen-line news story about a city council meeting. Students heard one of two versions of the meeting transcript: version one presented a source representing a neighborhood association and a source representing himself singly; version two presented the same sources in reverse order. Each set of testimony was the same length (ten lines). Testimony by the source representing the group used "we" and "our" a number of times, while the unaffiliated speaker used "I." Students devoted more space in their reports to the group source and presented testimony from the group source first, regardless of the order in which testimony was given. When forced to make a choice between the group source and the individual source, students largely rejected the unaffiliated source. Even when students included both sources, coverage favored the group source [12].

Does the Media Have Change Agent Status for Nursing?

Many groups in addition to nurses are discovering how significant the media is in shaping the public's knowledge and image of them, realizing that the group is at a disadvantage if the media neglect them or present a biased or hostile view. On the other hand, the media are also a powerful force for change, for correction, and for action, when they increase the public's awareness of a topic, person, group, or symbol. Of course, not all mass media messages precipitate action, but studies document instances of public campaigns which have achieved the full sequence of possible effects: first, new or increased attention, then cognitive change, affective change, and finally altered behavior.

Nurses are one group concerned about their depiction in the mass media, particularly since they feel that that image has been detrimental. This awareness has, no doubt, been much influenced by the women's movement generally, and the numerous studies about the view of women in the media have provided both findings and methods of study relevant to a study of the media's nursing image. In both fields there has been a wide discrepancy between the media image and reality.

As Harold Laswell pointed out thirty-two years ago, mass media pass on cultural values from one generation to the next [13]. The societal desire for continuity and transmission of dominant values may be particularly acute in times of rapid social change, such as our own. Individuals need some familiarity with the past, but they must also be prepared to meet changing social conditions. The depiction of women by the media, including the portrayal of nurses, serves to dampen their full utilization in the economy by discouraging women's occupational aspirations and encouraging their underemployment. This negative effect results because of the perpetuation of the outmoded sex role stereotype that women's place is in the home and that the ideal American woman is dependent and ineffectual in her attempts to move outside the home.

Key Role of Agenda Setting

Which messages the media choose to dispense has become the focus of numerous studies, because those choices influence what the audience thinks. Daily the gatekeepers of the mass media decide what to cover within their space or time limitation. Furthermore, accounts are unequal, some are detailed and emphasized, others touched on briefly. Audiences take note of what is emphasized in the media and incorporate these emphases into their personal agendas, that is, into their personal lists of meaningful or salient issues [14]. Furthermore, audiences tend to assign similar proportions of weight to the issues according to the amount of attention given in the media. As an inevitable result, they set the agenda for what the public thinks about. This priority process leads to increased salience of that topic or issue among the public [15].

Understanding the shape of the agenda for public discussion requires attention to the dynamics of issue expansion. As Cobb and Elder put it, "The underlying proposition is that the greater the size of the audience to which an issue can be enlarged, the greater the likelihood that it will attain systemic agenda standing and thus acceptance to a formal agenda." More specifically, they note, "Issues are likely to be expanded to a larger public if they can be defined broadly to appeal to many subgroups within the populus" [16]. Agenda-building is related to how problems are perceived and defined, the courses of action that are formulated to act on those problems, the legitimizing of one course of action over another, and the emergence of policies designed to continually address such problems. Clearly, agenda-building is the essence of allocation of scarce resources within the health care industry.

Accumulating empirical evidence suggests that

editors, news directors, and producers through their day-by-day selection and display of the media, provide their audiences with major cues about the relative importance of issues and other topics in the media [17]. In other words, media coverage influences the *perceived salience* of topics — especially social issues — in the audience's mind. The media's ability to significantly structure our perceptions of the world has come to be called the agenda-setting function of the media thereby setting the public discussion agenda [19].

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The history of Watergate as a political scandal exemplifies agenda-setting by the media. The *Washington Post* probed into an apparently minor event and began to outline it as an issue. Slowly television news, wire services, and other news media followed suit. Over time, the prominence of Watergate in the news grew and so did public concern. Television probably further strengthened salience with its extensive live coverage of the Watergate hearings chaired by Senator Sam Irvin [20].

The mass media, print and broadcast, are probably the most pervasive influences on attidues and opinions in the modern world. Consideration of media's capacities for agenda-setting have led to related studies about how the media influences the public opinion through status-conferral, stereotyping, and image-making further controlling the public's view of people or issues [21].

Can Better Public Information Improve Nursing Care?

Public concept of nursing is developed by various groups of people with different expectations. Among these groups are journalists and other communicators with their production values, various nursing groups wishing to change and enlarge media messages about nursing issues, and the general public as an audience with an obsolete, one-dimensional image of nurses and their roles.

People today live in two worlds: a real world and a media world. The first is defined by the direct experience of an individual and his acquaintances. The second spans a world defined by the decisions of news reporters, editors and producers [22]. Individuals in our society have no real world experience with many national and international problems. When they choose to deal with or ignore these problems, media world experience must suffice.

Right now, it is particularly crucial to determine the role news media plays informing the public of the existence and effectiveness of nursing and building mass consensus for resources to support and advance its services. The manner in which the public thinks of nurses will strongly influence the destiny of nursing and the contribution that nurses can make to better health care. Nurses, in learning the process and the critical role that information plays, will want to work to reduce the mismatch between the reality of nursing and the public it serves. People in our society have the right to define their health needs, goals, and aspirations and then to design the type of health care institutions that will best serve them. However, the public can properly define these needs and goals only if they have the information they need.

The importance of confronting this issue was recently underscored by the result of a Delphi Survey of the Fellows the American Academy of Nursing, conducted in 1979 to generate a list, by priority, of potential future program activities for the Academy. This survey was designed to obtain consensus regarding the relative importance of critical issues confronting the profession and the potential for impact in dealing with the issues. Initial assessment and results of this Delphia Survey suggest that the following three issues are perceived by the members of the American Academy of Nursing as most critical:

(1) Improve the public image of nursing.
(2) Develop public awareness of the unique contribution nursing makes to health care.
(3) Create public acceptance of nursing as an independent profession [23].

Selection of the importance of nursing's image by the profession's leaders indicates the crucial role that image plays in all aspects of nursing service, education, and research. Rather than assuming that the public recognizes the contributions of nurses to health care on the basis of face-to-face experiences, it will be more productive to bring reality, as conveyed by the mass

media, into closer alignment with the actual conditions of nursing.*

Conclusion: Greater Attention to Quality of Public Information About Nursing is Needed

There is a discrepancy betwen the nurses' and the public's opinion about nursing and which needs the profession should meet. Because of this discrepancy, conflicts swirl in and around today's nurses. Almost daily the public is reminded by the news media that serious problems exist in their local hospital. Dramatic headlines jolt them into awareness of these problems: that nurses are going on strike over inadequate wages and working conditions; that nurses accuse the administrators or their political superiors of insensitivity to appalling conditions, which, they charge, result in poor patient care; that accrediting agencies threaten withdrawal of accreditation for failure to meet minimum standards of staffing and professional practice; that health department officials threaten closure for violation of physical safety codes; that crusading politicians blitz through the corridors with photographers, and proclaim inadequacies in personnel, supplies, and facilities; that budgets are being cut, resulting in layoffs and curtailment of vital services; and, that nurses and patients alike are frustrated and handicapped by inefficiencies and impeded by obsolete buildings. Such headlines are indicators of the public information about nurses and nursing transmitted through the media, and they help define the direction in which nursing is perceived to be going.

Perhaps both the direction and the perception are in need of rearrangement. Access to the media's public discussion agenda aids the process of rearrangement in two ways: it legitimates a group's activities and behavior by comparing them with other groups, and it conveys prestige by providing visibility. To a considerable degree, the public reacts only to those things of which the press makes them aware. Most of the relevant world of social issues and significant action on those issues is out of sight and not experienced first hand by the average citizen. With the agenda-setting influence of the press, issues are more pervasive in detail and in simple awareness. This influence of the press on the perceived salience of social issues is such that the priorities of the press can become the priorities of the public. The ways in which nurses are presented, misrepresented, or underrepresented in the news media strongly affect people's notions on nurses' place as it is and as it ought to be. Thus, indicators of exactly what messages are being transmitted to the public are of vital importance for the present and future of nurses and the public they serve.

*Since 1977 the authors have been conducting an extensive study on the image of the nurse in the mass media funded by the same source as this article. This investigation has six components divided into print media (books, magazines and newspapers) and non print media (television, motion pictures and radio). They plan to publish results pointing to specific actions which can be taken to upgrade nursing's image.

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