

## Opinions

## public When journalists may be better than doctors

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Early this week, I got an interesting question from @KzytoFrancis about a BBC story on Ebola. The story titled, "Ebola: Everything you need to know about the outbreak" had been aired and also posted on YouTube on May 24. So, he asked: "@cbichachi [public editor], this story is getting hit in the comment section for choosing a BBC (senior) health and science correspondent, not a doctor to speak authoritatively on Ebola. In the broader context, is this justifiable or could it have been handled better?"

This story was not aired on any of the NMG platforms. However, as part of my media literacy responsibility, I am obliged to explain for his, and others benefit.

Thanks Francis for this question. It goes to the bottom of decisions editors/producers make when planning a story. The critical elements in such moments are: What is the story? Why is the story important? To what end is the story produced i.e. so what? What is the best way to tell this story? Who/what are the best sources to engage? Etc.

In the instant case, the BBC editor/producer decided the story was the current outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in Central Africa and the importance of the story was to create public awareness and understanding of the different facets of the disease – i.e. its origin, how it manifests, how it spreads, treatment, prevention, etc.

Having chosen the story and its purpose, the editor/producer chose the interview format where a reporter fields questions to an expert(s) who then explains the issues.

This is a good format for television because it is interactive as opposed to a monologue of a reporter telling audiences all they should know about Ebola!

The question then is, would a medical doctor have been a better choice of source than a senior health correspondent?

Many doctors tend to be technical and less eloquent when it comes to breaking down information for the common person to understand.

Odoobo C Bichachi  
Public Editor



According to [www.ncbuacademy.com](http://www.ncbuacademy.com), there are broadly four sources to leverage from when working on a story such as this. These are:

- Primary sources (direct knowledge): Individuals with firsthand knowledge, such as people directly involved in or affected by the issue, witnesses, and experts.
- Official sources: Government officials, company representatives, or organisation spokespersons.
- Secondary sources: Existing reporting, studies, documents, and reports that provide background.
- Alternative voices: Individuals who offer a different perspective from the mainstream consensus.

NBCU Academy is "a free, award-winning education program for developing new skills and advancing careers in journalism, media and technology".

We will notice from the above that a medical doctor is in the same "primary source" category as a senior health correspondent/expert. Both are well grounded in the subject. One may have handled Ebola patients or has access to medical information relating to the disease. The other has reported on earlier epidemics and in the process in-

teracted with different experts on the Ebola disease as well as read extensively about it. So either of the two would have been a worthy source or interview subject to explain the mechanics of Ebola to the BBC audience. However not any doctor in London could speak authoritatively about the disease. It would have to be a doctor in the affected area – Central Africa or within the World Health Organisation hierarchy, which would perhaps take time, a few more resources and logistical hurdles to reach him/her.

An in-house expert on the other hand is not just knowledgeable on the subject due to many years covering similar epidemics, he/she is also quickly accessible, is more familiar with broadcasting practices so can go on air at short notice, and logistically, will not cost the newsroom much to access/deploy.

Also, many doctors tend to be technical and less eloquent when it comes to breaking down information for the common person to understand. They tend to put out a lot of medical jargon. The senior health correspondent on the other hand is already a communications expert who knows what to say in a language that easily communicates to the ordinary people.

So back to @KzytoFrancis question. In many ways, the BBC's choice of interviewee was good and natural, particularly if time (ability to deliver the story fast) and cost of the interview are put into consideration.

Overall, from the comments, the information in the interview was good for the public, and was well delivered.

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We risk losing an opportunity to host  
Humanitarian Agency

damage could be severe. At a time when African countries are competing aggressively to host continental and international institutions, Uganda's apparent hesitation