

Highlighting racial disparities increases coverage and effectiveness of health news

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Effective communication of health news is needed to raise awareness and encourage behavior changes in populations who experience health disparities, or inequalities in health status, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. As media researchers search for better methods to reach audiences, a new University of Missouri study published in *Public Relations Review* has found that highlighting racial disparities in news releases increases coverage of health stories in black newspapers, which can improve health outcomes in populations at-risk for disparities.

"Framing news releases to include conflict factors, such as health disparities and risks, increases health news coverage in local black papers," said Glen Cameron, co-director of the Health Communication Research Center (HCRC) at the Missouri School of Journalism.

"Increased coverage of health disparities increases awareness and can result in better health outcomes in at-risk communities."

In the study, the researchers compared health news stories from mainstream papers and local black newspapers published in areas with high disparities for cancer. They found that health news stories in black newspapers contained more conflict factors. This suggests that public relations professionals should include health disparities and other conflict factors in news releases to improve coverage and effectiveness of health news. The use of conflict language also can increase readers' awareness of problems and encourage them to make positive changes.

"This study offers a great deal of promise for public relations professionals who frame news releases with 'conflict angles' that would appeal to reporters and editors," Cameron said. "This is not an unusual tactic for environmental and labor activists. Now, we are applying that tactic to health communication in communities with high disparities for cancer."

The study was conducted as a part of a larger project for the National Cancer Institute (NCI). In October 2008, NCI named MU's HCRC as part of a Center of Excellence in Cancer Communication Research based at Washington University. The center received an \$8.6 million grant, which funds research to improve health communication and health literacy among at-risk populations. A large portion of the grant funds Ozioma, a biweekly news service that produces localized cancer-related news releases for black communities. The project has increased news coverage and prompted changes in readers' behaviors.

The study "Generating Conflict for Greater Good: Utilizing Contingency Theory to Assess Black and Mainstream Newspapers as Public Relations Vehicles to Promote Better [Health](#) Among African Americans," was published in October 2009 in the *Public Relations Review*.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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