

Health news stories on local television news broadcasts are too short, researcher says

October 21 2013

Previous research has shown that the most popular way Americans get their health news is by watching local television broadcasts. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri School of Journalism have found that while local television news is the most common source of health news for Americans, most health news stories on local news broadcasts are only 30 seconds or less in length. Glen Cameron, the Maxine Wilson Gregory Chair in Journalism Research and professor of strategic communication at the MU School of Journalism, says this trend may lead to misunderstanding of important but complicated health news stories.

"This pattern of local [health news](#) reporting may be problematic because of the complex and rather technical nature of many health [news stories](#)," Cameron said. "For example, there is much medical jargon such as "pseudoephedrine," "dementia," or "cardiovascular arrest," involved with reporting health news; stories that are too short can leave viewers confused and inappropriately alarmed or complacent. In this sense, health news may need to be allocated more time to be truly beneficial to viewers."

Cameron also found that health news stories that dealt with advancements or treatments were mainly reported using gain-framed messages while stories about statistics and trends were mainly reported by loss-framed messages. Gain-framed messages communicate by giving positive reasons for avoiding a harmful behavior, while loss-framed messages focus on the negative consequences of continuing a harmful

behavior. For example, a gain-framed story might report that non-smokers are less likely to have [heart disease](#) while a loss-framed story might report that smokers are much more likely to suffer from heart disease. Cameron says this is important because people tend to react more positively to gain-framed messages about living healthy lifestyles. This tendency is called "self-efficacy."

"One of the important things about health news stories is whether they provide specific directions and successfully encourage viewers to take healthy actions," Cameron said. "The more self-efficacy people have, the more control they believe they have over their behavior, which can lead to positive behavior change. Self-efficacy influences the effort a person puts forth to change behavior and to continue, despite barriers and setbacks that may pose challenges. Television health news should seek to build audiences' feelings of self-efficacy in order to promote positive health behaviors."

Cameron says one example is the H1N1, or Swine Flu, epidemic. Due to concerns about the flu outbreak, an increased number of gain-framed reports, including information on how to prevent catching H1N1, were successful in helping to lessen the impact of the outbreak.

This study was published in *Health Communication*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Health news stories on local television news broadcasts are too short, researcher says (2013, October 21) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-health-news-stories-local-television.html>

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