

Health journalists utilize audience, other media to build news agenda

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Approximately one-fifth of Americans follow health news very closely, according to the Pew Research Center. To identify how the demand for health stories is met, University of Missouri researchers surveyed national health journalists about their development of story ideas and use of expert sources and public relations materials. The researchers found that health journalists determine what information is newsworthy by examining the work of their peers and the issues raised by their colleagues and audiences.

"What does this mean for health news [consumers](#)? It means that health journalists work together to filter information and select what they believe is most important for their audiences," said María Len-Ríos, assistant professor in the Missouri School of Journalism. "They try to provide readers with accurate information and evaluate sources so that there isn't undue influence by those who have vested interests in the information. This is the value that health journalists add to their news that may not be present in information from non-journalistic sources."

Len-Ríos and Amanda Hinnant, assistant professor in the Missouri School of Journalism, and other MU researchers surveyed 774 health journalists. They found that health journalists used non-public relations resources (other news media, self-interests, news audiences) more frequently than medical journals or public relations sources.

"Health journalists utilize other media, news audiences and their personal interests as resources for story ideas," Len-Ríos said. "When

journalists do use public relations sources, they are likely to rely on universities, nonprofits or government sources that are less likely to appear to have profit-based interests. The fact that journalists aren't looking to medical journals for health stories ideas - perhaps the source that contains the most detailed information - suggests a greater need to look to these primary sources."

According to the survey, journalists who used public relations sources more for story ideas tended to believe they should get information to the public quickly and advocate for their readers to improve their health. Conversely, other journalists view themselves as watchdogs of institutions and are wary of public relations sources, Len-Ríos said.

"The reliance on other media for story ideas is worth more exploration because it brings up questions of content diversity," Hinnant said. "How many stories are not making it into the intermedia agenda and for what reasons?"

More information: The study, "Health News Agenda Building: Journalists' Perceptions of the Role of [Public Relations](#)," was published recently in the summer 2009 issue of *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*.

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