

Implications and Possibilities: Public Health Content of Local Television News

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Poverty affects health status

Studies confirm socioeconomic status and educational level correlate with

- ▶ Mortality rates from heart disease, lung cancer, and diabetes and other serious illness
- ▶ Mortality rates of cancer patients
- ▶ Death rates of men
- ▶ Any premature death

Lowest third of population in income is at highest risk of premature death

Information can improve health

US and European study involving 4500 patients with chronic conditions found

- ▶ 49% of patients made positive changes after receiving information
- ▶ 74% of these reported a positive impact on their health

Is local television news a possible source of health information?

Given that

- ▶ heart disease, lung cancer and diabetes are the top three causes of death among the poorest
- ▶ local TV news is the most popular source of news in the US, and
- ▶ health information can improve health status..

Is local TV news a substantial source of health information about these health problems for people living in poverty?

The study question

What is the proportion of stories addressing heart disease, lung cancer, and diabetes, as compared to other stories in local news?

The study method

- ▶ Examined sample of videotaped local news stories
 - 7,673 stories from 2 weeks in 1998
 - 7,176 stories from 2 weeks in 2002
- ▶ Categorized these news stories by topic

Types of news stories found

Percent of
18,849 stories

- ▶ Crime stories 27%
- ▶ Public issue stories 24%
- ▶ Human interest stories 22%
- ▶ Health stories (n =876) 5.9%

Topics of health stories

Percent of
876 stories

- ▶ Infectious diseases 15.9%
- ▶ Cancer (excluding lung cancer) 10%
- ▶ Diet, fitness, cosmetic treatments 8.8%

Implications of local news story distribution

Health stories are not heavily included in local news broadcasts

Did health stories deal with the top three causes of death for the poor?

Heart disease, lung cancer, and diabetes covered

- ▶ In 51 (5.8%) stories
- ▶ Using 6.5% of time spent on health stories
- ▶ With median length of 29 seconds (6 seconds shorter than median of all news stories)
- ▶ In only 20 of 32 market areas
- ▶ Using less than 2% of news time in 10 markets
- ▶ Mostly in second block of broadcast or later
- ▶ With focus on risk, not prevention or treatment

Implications of coverage of top causes of death

Least valued of health stories

- ▶ Fewer stories
- ▶ Shorter time allocated to stories
- ▶ Omitted entirely in some TV markets
- ▶ Primarily in last portion of broadcast

How did health coverage differ in low versus high income TV markets?

Low income TV markets

- ▶ Story focus primarily on prevention and health legislation

High income TV markets

- ▶ Story focus primarily on epidemiology, cure, or top three causes of death

Implications of story distribution by market wealth

Those most in need of general information, of information about cures, or about the diseases that were most likely to kill them, were least likely to receive it

Implications of health topics covered by poverty of TV market

Those most in need of information regarding heart disease, the biggest killer of the poor, are least likely to get it from local news coverage.

Conclusions

- ▶ Local news, a popular source of information in the US, includes a very small portion of news about health
- ▶ That health news deals minimally with the top three causes of death among the poor
- ▶ Even the health news broadcast is not what would be most useful to the poor
- ▶ Local news broadcasts may present an opportunity for enhanced health information transmission.

Implications for public policy

- ▶ Reconsideration of relaxation of public interest regulations on the media
- ▶ Demand by public interest groups for coverage of public issues - to influence both media and regulatory change
- ▶ Efforts by public health advocates to encourage coverage of salient topics by TV market.

Future Areas of Study

- ▶ What information do news personnel have to choose from as they plan news broadcasts?
- ▶ Why are high-cost health news stories placed in the latter portions of broadcasts ?
- ▶ How can citizens and public health advocates mobilize to advocate for change?