

Health Coverage in Kentucky's Community Newspapers:  
Toward a More Informed Populace

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### Abstract

This study explores the role that Kentucky community newspapers play in providing information about health behaviors and their related outcomes. Through content analysis of sixteen newspapers, the researcher examines the amount of health behavior coverage, the most prevalent topics of the articles, and the article sources. The resulting data point to challenges related to 1) a lack of health coverage, 2) a need for better source attribution, and 3) a blurring of the lines between editorial and advertising content. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

## Health Coverage in Kentucky's Community Newspapers: Toward a More Informed Populace

In the United States of the twenty-first century, individuals are surrounded by information related to human health. From magazines like *Men's Health* to the Internet's WebMD to such media celebrities as *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* Dr. Mehmet Oz, national media sources provide staggering amounts of health-related information. Meanwhile, the National Newspaper Association (2008) has found that 86% of adult Americans read their community newspapers weekly. Thus emerges the question: what is the role of community newspapers in communicating the relationship between health behaviors and health outcomes?

This study explores this question through content analysis of 16 Kentucky newspapers. The researcher examined 224 newspaper editions covering a three-month span in the summer of 2008. She sought to identify the general prevalence of health information in the publications, the most common health-related topics, the primary sources of health information, and the relative expertise of these sources. She then analyzed the data to determine whether a relationship exists between source expertise and newspaper circulation size. The data that emerged point to challenges related to 1) a lack of coverage, 2) a need for better source attribution, and 3) a blurring of the lines between editorial and advertising content.

### Background

Modern Americans seek information about health and health behaviors from a variety of media sources. According to Dutta-Bergman (2004), primary sources for individuals who self-identify as health-conscious and health-oriented include print publications and the Internet. Brodie, Kjellson, Hoff, and Parker (1999) have found that the predilection for depending on

media as a chief source of health information transcends racial barriers, with African-Americans, Latinos, and whites all confirming their reliance on media health coverage.

Clark and Hall (2005) have called for communication researchers to employ content analysis to observe both the trends and the gaps in media health coverage. In one such analysis of news coverage related to network news anchor Peter Jennings' and actress Dana Reeve's lung cancers, Hust, Van de Vord, & Chen (2006) chastised the media for providing incomplete and inaccurate information.

With so many individuals utilizing media for health information, news outlets clearly have a unique public health opportunity that often goes unfulfilled. For example, researchers have bemoaned the lack of news coverage related to cancer prevention and detection (Slater, Long, Bettinghaus, & Reineke, 2007), while the small amount information that does appear tends to cluster around certain topics. In an analysis of newspaper coverage, Stryker, Moriarty, and Jensen (2008) discovered that individuals who paid attention to health news better understood cancer risks related to obesity and smoking than the relationships between cancer and sun exposure, alcohol, or exercise. This finding was indicative of coverage amounts for the topics, with obesity and smoking risks being the primary cancer-related topics while sun exposure, alcohol, and exercise were rarely covered.

These mixed results for newspaper coverage of health information are occurring simultaneously with a rising trend in advertorials, or "advertisement[s] designed to simulate editorial content" (Advertorial.org, 2008). Because individuals automatically are skeptical of advertising content (Dahlen & Edenius, 2007), advertisers have begun camouflaging such content, "often provid[ing] no salient cue as to its true identity" (Crook, 2004, p. 732).

Consistently ranking among the top five topics for such advertorial content are pieces related to health and fitness (Stout, Wilcox, & Greer, 1989; Cameron & Ju-Pak, 2000).

Blurring the line between editorial and advertising content, advertorials are defined by Cameron and Ju-Pak (2000) as “blocks of paid-for, commercial message, featuring any object or objects (such as products, services, organizations, individuals, ideas, issues, etc.) that stimulates the editorial content of a publication in terms of design/structure, visual/verbal content, and/or context in which it appears” (pp. 66-67). Such pieces often appear in newspapers as special advertising sections, complete with advertising story content alongside more visually traditional advertisements. As Eckman (2003) puts it, “Advertorials...are products that look like news and read like news, but are in fact often bought and controlled by advertisers” (p. 65).

This masking of advertising as editorial content has been shown to positively impact readers’ attention, perceived message relevance, and message recall (Kim, Pasadeos, & Barban, 2001), while increasing perceived credibility (Cameron, 1994). As Donaton puts it, “[T]here’s a danger in that it becomes more difficult for readers to make the distinction between regular editorial matter and special ad sections” (p. S-16). In fact, Wilkinson, Hausknecht, & Prough (1995) found that more than one-fourth of subjects in a study incorrectly classified an advertorial as unpaid editorial content rather than as paid advertising content intended solely to promote product. This confusion reflects what Erjavec (2004) has termed “interpractice” – i.e., a situation in which the reader of a promotional news item “believes that he/she is reading the news, whereas in reality, he/she is reading advertisements” (p. 557).

Such information pollution (Cameron and Curtin, 1994) contributes to journalistic concerns about the use of advertorials, which many feel are “oppositional to the ideals [of objectivity] that have guided news professionalism since the 1950s” (Eckman, 2003, p. 76). In

response, the Society of Professional Journalists (2008) has addressed the blurring of lines in its *Code of Ethics*, which states that ‘journalists should...[d]istinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two’ (“Seek Truth...” section, item 16).

Unfortunately, such guidelines are not always followed. Erjavec (2004) notes that

the generic structure of promotional news reports is at first glance the same as with other news reports. The form of the news reports analysed – headline, lead, and satellites – is not different from that of neighbouring news reports. Only a detailed discourse analysis reveals that the news reports analysed include elements of promotional discourse. (p. 563)

Further, Cameron and Ju-Pak (2000) have discovered that 26% of advertorials feature “what can only be called a bogus byline to provide the trappings of a news story” (p. 72).

Even when the Society of Professional Journalists guidelines are followed, the actual cognitive impact of content delineation could be negligible. Kim (2001) found that more than two-thirds of subjects who were exposed to an advertorial did not recall the presence of an advertising label that accompanied the piece. Further, Wilkinson, Hausknecht, & Prough (1995) found that readers who incorrectly classified advertorial content as editorial content did so based primarily on “their overall impressions of the wording and style and the amount of information conveyed” (p. 253). Thus, the style of the advertorial itself could be as important as the surrounding trappings in determining how readers approach advertorial content.

### Research Questions

This study set out to discover basic information about the amount of health behavior coverage and primary topics across a sample of rural Kentucky newspapers. To this end, the project was guided by two key research questions:

RQ1: What health behavior topics receive the most coverage in rural Kentucky newspapers?

RQ2: What are the primary sources of health behavior information in rural Kentucky newspapers?

A third research question was added in an attempt to detect any trends related to newspaper circulation size and coverage levels or source expertise:

RQ3: Do Kentucky newspapers' circulation sizes relate to the amount of coverage and/or the relative expertise of sources in rural coverage of health behavior information?

### Methodology

In attempting to evaluate Kentucky community newspaper coverage of health behaviors and their related outcomes, the researcher examined sixteen semiweekly and weekly newspapers available through the University of Kentucky Library archives. The sixteen newspaper titles that were analyzed represented varying circulation sizes: three publications had circulation sizes of less than 2,000; five had circulation sizes between 2,000 and 4,000; four had circulation sizes of 4,000 to 6,000; and four had circulation sizes exceeding 6,000. The sample was restricted to newspapers that had received tailored, county-specific health-related press releases from the University of Kentucky during the early summer of 2008. The archive search yielded 224 total newspaper editions representing a three-month span from June through August of 2008.

Because this study specifically examines coverage of health-related behaviors, articles addressing acute illness or outbreaks, advertising fundraisers or classes, or focusing on the business of health care were omitted from the dataset. In all, the researcher identified a total of 151 articles related to health conditions that can be positively or negatively impacted through behavior change. The articles were coded for both topic and source credibility. When articles included multiple topics – for example, obesity, cardiovascular health, and cancer all covered by a single article -- they were coded once for each topic. The researcher then analyzed the data to determine whether relationships existed among topic, source expertise, and newspaper circulation size.

## Findings

### *Health Behavior Coverage*

The results of this study point to an overall lack of health behavior information in the community newspapers analyzed, with 224 editions yielding only 151 articles. On average, the smaller the newspaper circulation size the greater the amount of health behavior coverage, with 58.3% of all articles found appearing in newspapers with circulation sizes of less than 4,000. This number becomes even more surprising given that all eight of the smaller newspapers publish weekly and, therefore, represent only 95 newspaper editions, as opposed to 129 newspaper editions for circulation sizes exceeding 4,000. Thus, the smaller newspapers in this sample were almost twice as likely as the larger newspapers to publish articles related to health behaviors; unfortunately, the smaller newspapers also were far more likely to utilize advertorial content, as will be seen.

Within the coverage analyzed, a number of topics emerged. The most common health-related subject was obesity and weight loss, representing 40 articles, or 26.5% of all coverage. Topics discussed in these articles ranged from statewide assessments of obesity rates to community weight loss initiatives to family nutrition programs. The subject's popularity was common to all newspaper sizes, with obesity ranking first in coverage in every circulation size. The amount and consistency of coverage for this topic could be related to Kentucky's highly visible obesity epidemic, with an estimated 27.4% of the state's citizens qualifying as obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control (2007).

The second most covered health behavior category involved warnings about seasonal health behaviors. With a total of 32 articles, seasonal health behaviors accounted for 21.2% of the coverage analyzed. Given that the samples analyzed were published during the summer months, these articles related primarily to excessive sun exposure and dehydration and encouraged readers to use sunscreen and consume adequate fluids. Again, coverage amounts were constant among newspaper circulation sizes, with seasonal behaviors ranking second in each circulation category.

Two topics – cardiovascular disease and cancer – shared the position of third most popular health behavior topic, with 18 articles addressing each subject. Cardiovascular articles often overlapped with obesity articles and tended to focus on the importance of exercise for improving cardiovascular health. Cancer-related articles advocated appropriate screening practices, as well as behavior change to reduce risk factors. Coverage of these topics appeared relatively constant across circulation sizes, as well.

Chiropractic care also received a notable amount of coverage, with 14 articles addressing the subject. The negative health impacts of smoking and the positive health impacts of

immunization and screening behaviors were discussed in 12 articles each. A number of additional topics were featured in less than ten articles each. See Table 1.

Table 1.

*Number of Health Behavior Articles by Topic and Circulation, June – August 2008*

Topic	Circ. < 2000	Circ. 2001-4000	Circ. 4001-6000	Circ. >6000	Total Articles
Obesity/Weight Loss	10	11	10	9	40
Seasonal Health	7	10	9	6	32
Cardiovascular	5	5	3	5	18
Cancer	7	5	3	3	18
Chiropractic	6	4	0	4	14
Smoking	4	5	1	2	12
Immunizations/Screenings	3	4	3	2	12
Psychiatric/					
Chemical Dependency	1	2	1	3	7
Dental	2	2	0	1	5
Arthritis	1	2	1	0	4
Prenatal	0	2	1	1	4
Asthma	1	0	0	2	4
Stroke	1	1	0	1	3
Osteoporosis	2	1	0	0	3
Breastfeeding	0	0	0	2	2
Diabetes	0	1	0	1	2
Dysentery	1	0	0	1	2
HIV	2	0	0	0	2
Parkinson's Disease	2	0	0	0	2
Hormone Replacement Therapy	1	1	0	0	2
Prescription Compliance	0	0	0	1	1
Alzheimer's Disease	0	0	0	1	1
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome	0	0	1	0	1

*Health Article Sources*

This analysis revealed a lack of adequate sourcing for health-related articles among many of the community newspapers examined. Of the 151 articles analyzed, 58, or 38.4%, listed no source at all. The trend was clear: the smaller the newspaper circulation size, the greater the number of unsourced articles. Among newspapers with circulation sizes of less than 4,000, more than half of all health behavior articles were unsourced. In contrast, only 21.2% of articles in newspapers with circulation sizes exceeding 4,000 were unsourced. The lack of a byline makes it difficult to assess the credibility of a given article. While it was possible in some instances for the researcher to discern press release copy and identify a probable source, it is questionable whether lay readers note the absence of bylines or recognize the possibility that they could be reading promotional copy from unknown authors.

Among articles that were sourced, very few were attributed to original work by newspaper staff. Only 18 articles, or 11.9%, contained bylines identifying a staff writer or editor. Further, it became clear that medical professionals themselves rarely serve as the direct source of health behavior information. Only 13 articles were written by physicians, nurses, or other medical professionals. Of these 13 articles, five were written by chiropractors, and four of these served a primarily promotional purpose by advocating that readers visit a chiropractor for ailments ranging from arthritis to obesity to mediocre golf skills.

The vast majority of sourced articles were from press releases authored by organizations to promote specific health behaviors. Among the sixteen newspapers included in the study, only two published the health-related press release issued by the University of Kentucky. The press releases that were published were distributed by such organizations as cooperative extension offices, state and local health departments, the American Lung Association, state advocacy

organizations like the Greater Kentucky Alzheimer's Association, and faith-based organizations such as the Seventh-Day Adventists. Clearly, the level of medical expertise among the organizational authors varied widely; however, in all cases but one, press release copy was included without editorial comment. The lone exception was a release from a local health department about the health benefits of breastfeeding, which was run with an editorial disclaimer that "the views expressed in this column may not necessarily represent the views of" the newspaper.

### *Advertorial Content*

Approximately one-third of the 151 articles included in this study were classifiable as advertorial content that blurred the lines between editorial content and paid advertising. This blurring was accomplished in two different but related ways.

The first – and most common – method of incorporating advertorial content involved the publication of advertising supplements featuring health-related information. Newspaper advertising supplements with such titles as "Creative Living" and "Senior Living" accounted for 37 articles, or 24.5% of all articles related to health behaviors. All occurrences of this phenomenon occurred in newspapers with circulation sizes below 4,000. Thus, supplement advertorials comprised 42.1% of all health behavior content in smaller community newspapers. Often, the fact that these supplements solely consisted of advertorial content was unclear, with the word "advertisement" appearing unobtrusively in a small, light-colored font on the cover and/or contents page alone.

The second way in which newspapers published advertorials was through the use of content management firms. These news release distribution services contract with corporate,

governmental, and nonprofit clients to broaden the reach of their promotional pieces, promising to “provide an easy, cost-effective method of getting [their] story to every newspaper in the country” (North American Precis Syndicate, 2008). The firms then market themselves to newspapers as providers of “free, high quality feature articles to reporters, editors and print publishers” (ARA Content, 2008). Thirteen, or 8.6%, of health behavior articles in this study were issued by news release distribution agencies.

### Summary

With many individuals relying increasingly on the media for health information ((Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Brodie, Kjellson, Hoff, & Parker, 1999), it is imperative that community newspapers recognize their role in shaping attitudes that lead to improved health behaviors. As such, newspapers should provide adequate amounts of health information as clearly as possible. In response to Clark and Hall’s (2005) call that content analysis be employed to determine trends in health coverage, this study sought to identify the chief topics and amounts of health behavior coverage in Kentucky’s community newspapers. The research also examined the health information sources being utilized. Finally, the study sought to identify whether coverage and sourcing trends were related to newspaper circulation sizes.

What emerged was a dearth of health behavior coverage. The newspapers examined averaged approximately .67 articles per newspaper edition, with smaller newspapers being more likely to include health behavior information. Unfortunately, smaller newspapers also relied more heavily on unsourced material and advertorial content. Topics receiving the most coverage in newspapers of all sizes included obesity and weight loss, seasonal health issues,

cardiovascular disease and exercise, and cancer prevention and detection. A number of other health topics received lesser amounts of coverage.

Three primary concerns are highlighted by this research. First, there is a great need for Kentucky's community newspapers to increase coverage of health behaviors and health outcomes. Second, source attribution needs to be improved, with articles featuring bylines that clearly indicate both the author and her or his expertise. Finally, Kentucky community newspaper editors should abide by the Society of Professional Journalists call for clear distinctions between editorial and advertising content, thus minimizing reader confusion about promotional copy.

#### Further Research

There are many opportunities for additional research in this area. A longitudinal study tracking the ebbs and flows of Kentucky health behavior coverage would be valuable in determining whether such coverage is increasing or decreasing. Qualitative interviews with newspaper editors could assist in identifying the underlying causes of the lack of health coverage, while finding ways to encourage increased coverage. Finally, much additional research is needed regarding the potential for reader confusion brought on by advertorial content. In particular, future research should focus on the ways in which age, literacy levels, and other demographic patterns mitigate or exacerbate the blurring of the lines between editorial and advertising content.

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