

Public Abstract

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Title: Building a Media Agenda on Health Disparities: How Issue Perceptions and News Values Work to Influence Effectiveness

Turning to a usually ignored side of a prominent issue, that is, the role of media in helping eliminate racial disparities in health care, this dissertation aims to find out how to enhance the media coverage of the issue, in terms of both quantity and quality.

In-depth interviews were conducted with health care journalists and public relations practitioners nationwide on their perceptions about health disparities, and how they covered or generated media coverage of the issue. The results showed that while not so many public relations practitioners paid much attention to health disparities, among those who did, their messages were generally picked up by the media "pretty well". Journalists, especially those working for black newspapers, on the other side, reported using materials they got from health organizations pretty often. Further analysis showed that those practitioners who had similar views with journalists on issue perceptions and news values tended to be able to generate more coverage, which is summarized with a model of agenda building on prosocial issues. One of the implications is that more interactions between public relations practitioners and journalists will help generate media coverage on certain issues.

Regarding the media coverage of health disparities itself, both health communicators and the actual content analysis of the coverage pointed to several weaknesses. Lack of coverage, especially in mainstream newspapers, and an overall lack of in-depth coverage beyond hard figures and straight reports was prominent. Public relations practitioners and journalists are encouraged to use more localized news, include a community angle, and focus not only on what is happening, but why it is happening, what is being done and what should have been done.