

Public Abstract

First Name:Emily

Middle Name:Gresham

Last Name:Wherle

Adviser's First Name:Maria

Adviser's Last Name:Len-Rios

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

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Title:Can Public Relations Professionals Help Span the Boundaries Between Scientists and Journalists, and Does This Function Help Increase Accuracy of News Articles About Public Health?

A function of public relations professionals working for state and local health department is to facilitate communication between public health professionals and the news media. The purpose of this research was to examine the role of PR professionals in the communication process, and to determine whether the involvement of a PR professional leads to improved news article accuracy.

This study asked news sources to analyze 167 news articles about state and local health departments to determine, from the news source's perspective, the accuracy of public health news articles, as well as the role of public relations professionals working in state and local health departments. An online survey of sources quoted in articles in major metropolitan newspapers was conducted to examine these issues.

Public relations professionals were involved in 51.5% of the articles included in the survey, with arranging the logistics of the media interview being the most common media relations function. Of those working with a PR professional, 64% indicated that the PR professional had arranged the logistics of the interview. The number of errors in news articles decreased with the involvement of a PR professional, from a mean of 1.11 objective errors per story and 1.35 subjective errors per story to a mean of 0.83 objective errors per story and 1.23 subjective errors per story. Errors were found in 63.5% of news articles, and common reasons for errors included deadline pressure (35.6%), complex information (56.1%) and confusing events (26%), which is consistent with previous studies on news accuracy. In this study, phone interviews were the most common method for gathering information for the article, with 77.1% indicating that a phone interview was used.

The role of public relations professionals in news accuracy has not been examined in previous research, and this research was a first attempt to measure the impact of PR professionals on public health news stories. While the majority of the results from this survey are not statistically significant, this area is worthy of further research, perhaps using alternate research methods.