

Increasing Publicity and Thematic News Coverage: The Impact of Localizing News Releases in a State-Wide Experimental Field Study

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In a statewide experimental field study, Kansas newspapers were sent news releases over a four-month period addressing four children's health issues. Half of the releases contained state-level data; half contained county-level data. A content analysis showed that the effect of localizing content was overwhelming, with county-level data published 6-to-1 times more than state-level news releases. Additionally, front-page placement of news releases occurred one-quarter of the time. A last paragraph that provided resources for additional information was included in publication almost 70% of the time. Moreover, key text presenting children's health issues as a chronic rather than an episodic event was retained nearly 95% of the time. Utilization of readily available, public data and relational software can efficiently increase publication frequency and prominence of motivated messages — in this case, children's health — and impact the rhetorical framing of those topics in newspapers.

INTRODUCTION

The publicity function within the field of public relations provides volumes of information subsidies to media outlets. As gatekeepers, media outlet decision makers can reject, select in part, or select in whole those information subsidies for inclusion into news content. Motivated communicators want to advance specific motivated messages while media gatekeepers want to provide their audiences with relevant, newsworthy content. As a result, the degree to which news subsidies fit gatekeepers' perceptions of newsworthiness has predicted the inclusion of motivated messages into news content. One characteristic of newsworthiness, geographical relevance, became the sole independent variable of the current study. This statewide experimental field study manipulated the degree to which information was localized in print news releases and measured the impact on selection, placement, and retention of key message characteristics in newspaper content. Other variables of interest include publication frequency, circulation, and utilization of graphics. In general, localizing releases greatly increases selection, heightened placement prominence, and increased thematic framing of endemic children's health issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the fact that the public relations industry provides volumes of information subsidies to media outlets, few scholarly studies overtly question the impact of news

release characteristics on publication, placement, or presentation of motivated messages in newspapers (Aronoff, 1976; Hong, 2008; Morton & Warren, 1992; Turk, 1986, 1985; Turk & Franklin, 1987). Overall, studies find that news releases fitting editors' perceptions of newsworthiness are more likely to be selected for inclusion into news content (Aronoff, 1976; Turk 1986). Hong (2008) found that deviance within news releases increased the likelihood of publication by 60 times. In addition, social significance increased the likelihood of publication by eight times. Morton and Warren (1992) found that small-circulation papers were more likely to publish hometown releases. However, hypotheses that weekly papers were more likely to accept news subsidies and that photographs would increase selection were not supported (Morton and Warren, 1992).

In addition to inclusion of messages into news content, motivated communicators often are concerned with how those issues are framed within the news content. Social activists are often disappointed when endemic, long-term issues receive episodic framing in news coverage that encourages that incidences be perceived as anomalies as opposed to tacit, ongoing problems in need of remediation. Likewise, children's health advocates lament crisis-oriented coverage that contains little contextual reportage about children's health issues' systemic causes and solutions (Wilkinson & Mormot, 2003).

Beyond examining the impact of localizing releases impact on selection and prominence of placement, the current study questioned the degree to which editors retain final paragraphs supplying information resources to readers and retain news release content that contextualized understandings of children's health issues. Public health advocates argue that traditional methods of reportage distort the public's perception of health problems and solutions. Research suggests that three elements are needed for contextual understanding of a health issue: social/environmental context, risk factors and prevention strategies (Dorfman, Thorson & Stevens, 2001). These elements, albeit briefly, were addressed in the news releases designed for this project.

Public health advocates maintain that more coverage of non-medical, non-traditional health issues would promote understanding of the in-depth, systemic issues that affect children's health, but results of the survey that launched this project suggest that today's editors think traditional health stories (e.g. immunization, nutrition, substance abuse) are more important than non-traditional stories (e.g. the benefits of all-day kindergarten, the availability of affordable child care, and the increased number of working teenagers) (Bressers, 2005). As such, four topics related to children's health issues were used in the current study and an examination of topics' popularity among editors was also conducted.

METHOD

In a statewide experimental field study, all 242 newspapers that were members of the Kansas Press Association, 95% of the total number in the state, were supplied with news releases over a four-month period addressing four chronic children's health issues. Some news releases contained state-level data and graphics while the other

news releases were tailored for each of the 105 counties in Kansas to contain county-level data and graphics. Using standard randomization technology, the daily newspapers were randomized and, for comparison purposes, the non-daily newspapers were randomized. The first month, half of the newspapers received news releases with state-level data and the other half received releases with county-level data. The second month the newspapers that had received county-level releases the previous month received state-level releases and vice versa. At the conclusion, each newspaper had received two county-level news releases and two-state level news releases on an alternating basis.

A content analysis of all the newspapers measured inclusion and placement of news releases along with inclusion of text that provided additional informational resources and text that contextualized the children's health issues being examined. The frequency of publication and circulation of target newspapers were examined in light of findings, and the four specific children's health topics were examined for popularity among gatekeepers.

With commercially available database management software and minimal staff resources, researchers designed a system that electronically created news releases about four children's health topics, each customized to every county in Kansas. The releases were e-mailed to randomly selected half of the 242 newspapers. For comparison purposes, the same news releases were generated with more general state-level data — typical of those produced by social service agencies — that were e-mailed to the other half of the newspapers.

The source of data used to generate the localized releases was the Kansas KIDS COUNT report sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and distributed, including in digital form, through the Community Level Information on Kids system by the Kansas Action for Children organization. The system reports objective indicators describing the status of children's health-related well-being over a period of several years. The four topics chosen, in part because they had the most recent data and in part because they had the fewest counties with missing data, were:

- (1) the availability of adequate child care in Kansas,
- (2) the availability of adequate prenatal care in Kansas,
- (3) the number of students who graduate from high school in Kansas, and
- (4) the rates of child abuse and neglect in Kansas.

During summer of 2006, the principal investigator, a veteran journalist, interviewed credible news sources and wrote news releases on each of the four health-related issues. Utilizing an experimental design, two versions of the news releases were written for each topic: one version included county-level health data and the other version included state-level health data. The text of each news release was limited to one page and was single-spaced. Each news release had a corresponding graphic showing trends over time. The graphics accompanying news releases with county-specific data showed county data over time and compared county data with overall state figures. The graphics accompanying news releases with state-level data showed state data over

time only. Each of the four news releases was reviewed for accuracy by the news source who had been interviewed. See Appendices A and B, respectively, for the four county-level and four state-level news releases and accompanying graphics. One news release was sent per month from August through November in 2006 to the 242 newspapers. Given that the news releases were not time sensitive, they were sent on Thursday or Friday to avoid e-mailing them during the beginning and middle of the week when the production process at non-daily newspapers is the busiest. The months were chosen to include a sample of “slow-news times” (the late summer days of August), “busy-news times” (the beginning of the school year in September), an “average-news time” (October), and a “pre-holiday/holiday time” (November).

Utilizing the newspaper archive resources of the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka, the content of each issue of every newspaper was analyzed during that four-month period to determine, among other questions, whether newspapers were more likely to publish the news releases with county-level data and whether newspapers published the three public health components included on all of the generic templates: context, risk factors and solutions/strategies. Data were analyzed.

FINDINGS

Results are presented to cover the frequency of adoption of state versus county-level releases. The prominence of placement of adopted news release and the utilization of graphics were examined. The frequency of the publication (daily versus non-daily) was explored in relation to publication characteristics. Researchers examined if published releases would retain text providing informational resources to readers and text that contextualizes children’s health issues. Finally, the timing and topics of published release were explored and circulation/readership impacts assessed.

Frequency of Publication

Far more of the news releases with county-level data were published than news releases with the generic, state-level data. Specifically, the newspapers published 48 news releases with the localized, county-level data during the four-month period. By comparison, eight generic state-level releases were published during that period. In other words, the number of news releases with county-level data published was six times greater than the number of news releases with state-level data.

In total, 56 of the children’s health news releases were published, a number far exceeding what would be expected with typical mass distribution of prepared news releases. Kansas KIDS COUNT personnel tracked a total of seven published news releases when its annual state-level only news release was faxed to the state’s newspapers the previous spring. Thus, the publication rate in this project exceeded earlier efforts by 700%.

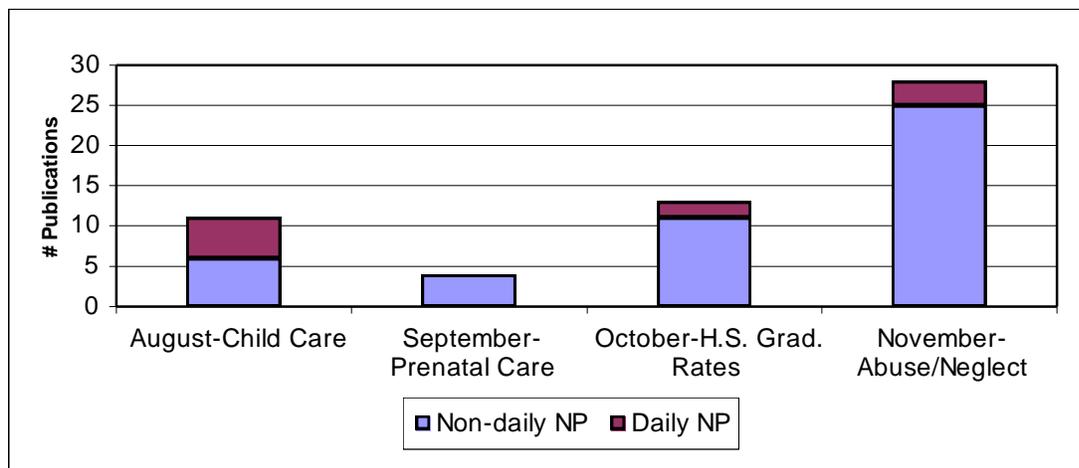
Prominence of Placement

On the issue of prominence of placement, the news releases that were published were placed on the front page of the newspaper 25% of the time; one out of every four stories was on page one. Among the daily newspapers, four — 40% — were published on the front page. Among the non-daily newspapers, 10 — 21.7% — were published on page one.

Daily vs. Non-Daily Newspapers

While the total number of news releases published was high overall, the results indicate that the non-daily newspapers published far more of the news releases — both the county-level and the state-level news releases — than their daily counterparts. See Figure 1. Specifically, the non-dailies published 39 news releases localized with county-level data and 7 news releases with state-level data, for the total of 46 news releases over the four-month period. Daily newspapers published nine news releases localized with county-level data and one news release with state-level data.

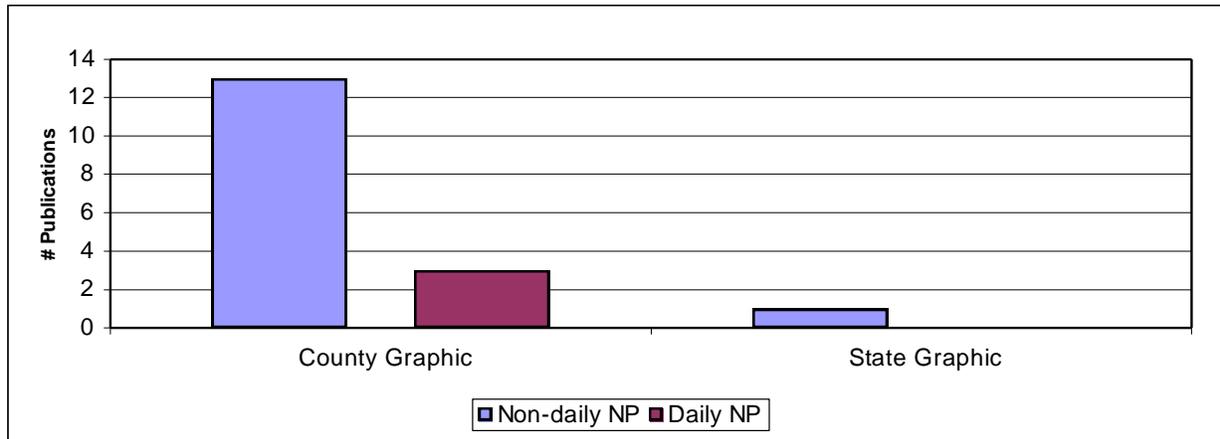
Figure 1. Daily vs. Non-Daily Newspaper Publication of Children’s Health Stories



Utilization of Graphics

Graphical data were included with the news releases and, again, the county-level graphics were far more likely to be published. Figure 2 shows that daily and non-daily newspapers published county-level graphics 21 times, or a total of 37.5% of the graphics provided. Only one state-level graphic was utilized.

Figure 2. Daily vs. Non-daily Newspaper Publication of Children’s Health Stories



Newspapers were much less likely to include the source of the information for the graphic — it was published in 16 stories, for 26% of the time. The URL for the raw data used was included six times (10.7% of the time).

Textual Characteristics of Published Releases

Three of the four news releases ended with a short paragraph indicating information resource information should further information be sought by either the newspaper editors or the newspapers’ readers. That information was published in 38 instances or 67.9% of the time.

Each news release in the experiment contained the three elements health advocates argue are needed for contextualizing health issues: social/environmental context, risk factors and prevention information. While newspaper workers deleted paragraphs in some news releases, the three elements important to public health advocates were published in 53 out of the total of 56 news releases (94.6% of the time). The three times the news releases were published without all three of the essential elements occurred with the non-daily newspapers.

Topics and Timing of Publication

The daily newspapers most often published the release about the availability of affordable child care and the non-daily newspapers most often published the release dealing with rates of child abuse and neglect. With both the daily and non-daily newspapers, the news release about prenatal health care was published least. It was the only news release that the daily newspapers did not publish at all — in either the county-level or state-level version.

Table 1 shows the number of county- and state-level news releases published by daily and non-daily newspapers by children’s health topic, in descending order.

Table 1.

Number and Topics of News Releases Published by Daily and Non-daily Newspapers Each Month

Topic (and Month) of News Release	Non-daily	Daily	Total
Abuse and neglect-county data	22	2	24
Abuse and neglect-state data	3	1	4
Total (November)	25	3	28
Graduation rates-county data	9	2	11
Graduation rates-state data	2	0	2
Total (October)	11	2	13
Child care-county data	5	5	10
Child care-state data	1	0	1
Total (August)	6	5	11
Prenatal care-county data	3	0	3
Prenatal care-state data	1	0	1
Total (September)	4	0	4

Finally, it should be noted that November and October experienced the highest publication rates — 28 and 13, respectively, with 11 publications in August and 4 in September. In other words, publication rates in October and November were more than triple the publication rates in August and September.

Newspaper Circulations and Potential Readership

Table 2.

Circulation by News Release Topic

News Release Topic	Circulation
Child Care	26,850
Prenatal Care	6,769
Graduation Rates	28,432
Abuse and Neglect	89,155
Total	151,206

Considered in the totality, the news releases published by Kansas newspapers from August through November had a combined circulation of 151,206 readers. November's release about abuse and neglect circulated to the highest number of potential readers and prenatal care circulated to the lowest number of potential readers. Table 2 provides details.

Advocates seeking to have their messages published in newspapers might assume that the greater goal would be publication in daily newspapers that have, by far, the largest circulations in areas of greatest population density. However, the results

here clearly show that the non-daily newspapers are far more likely to publish the news releases than are the daily newspapers. That said, an examination of the circulation figures shows that the non-daily newspapers circulated to more than twice as many

potential readers as the daily newspapers. Taken in totality, the non-daily newspapers circulated to 101,719 potential readers during the four-month trial period; the daily newspapers circulated to 49,487 potential readers.

For comparative purposes, Table 3 shows the individual daily and non-daily circulation rates for each news release.

Table 3.
Circulation Figures of Daily and Non-daily Newspapers that Published News Releases, by News Release Topic

August		September		October		November	
Child Care Release		Prenatal Care Release		Graduation Rate Release		Abuse & Neglect Release	
Daily	Non-daily	Daily	Non-daily	Daily	Non-daily	Daily	Non-daily
4,341	3,228		1,810	2,186	2,106	21,187	2,873
3,964	931		1,956	2,210	2,360	6,300	7,618
1,586	2,360		2,150		2,129	2,210	2,582
3,293	805		853		1,504		3,100
2,210	1,705				4,824		1,844
	2,427				520		887
					1,956		887
					2,150		2,480
					1,486		4,824
					2,873		2,427
					2,128		1,767
							2,540
							861
							2,150
							4,900
							2,281
							1,658
							1,255
							1,810
							1,333
							956
							853
							3,000
							2,356
							2,216
15,394	11,456	0	6,769	4,396	24,036	29,697	59,488

Other Results

Other interesting results emerged from a contextual standpoint. A few of the newspapers made improvements to the news releases. The weekly Rush County News, for example, omitted four contextual paragraphs from the news release about child abuse and neglect and substituted other statistics and comments from the director of the county County-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program. The semi-weekly Russell County News omitted four paragraphs from the news release on increasing graduation rates and substituted comments from the high school principal. The semi-weekly Hugoton Hermes added three paragraphs to the release about graduation rates explicating the national perspective and substituted the graphic provided with a graphic that provided U.S. graduation rates. Clearly, these newspapers further localized stories they would likely not have generated at all had the original news release — with the contextual KIDS COUNT data — not been provided to them initially.

DISCUSSION

Localizing releases to include county-level data was found to have a significant impact on the likelihood that gatekeepers would adopt news releases for publication in Kansas newspapers. Localized releases were published 6-to-1 over state-level releases. Not only were publication rates achieved, one-quarter of releases made front-page news during the time span studied. Non-daily papers were more likely to accept releases for publication than daily newspapers. While each non-daily may have smaller circulation than dailies, the aggregate impact of higher adoption among non-dailies resulted in reaching more potential readers state-wide.

Informational resources for reader were retained in the published releases 67.9% of the time. Importantly, the textual characteristics endorsed by health advocates were retained in most of the news releases printed. By an overwhelming majority (nearly 95% of time) the news executives left intact paragraphs dealing with the components that some public health advocates maintain are crucial for contextual understanding of the issues at hand: social/environmental context, risk factors, and prevention strategies (or solutions). Likewise, the graphics provided with the news releases added further context by pictorially showing the data over time and data relative to the state and to other counties. Indeed, the combination of the textual message and the visual portrayal arguably equaled a sum greater than its parts in furthering contextual understanding of the issue at hand.

Public health advocates maintain that more coverage of non-medical, non-traditional health issues would promote understanding of the in-depth, systemic issues that affect children's health. As indicated, the topics of the four news releases were determined partly by the availability of current data in digital form. Still, an interesting finding emerges, albeit unintentionally as it was beyond the purview of this project. The issue of child abuse and neglect — a "traditional" type of children's health topic — was published most often, with a total of 28 publications. But the news releases about high school graduation rates and the availability of child care — both "non-traditional" children's health issues, to be sure — were published 13 and 11 times, respectively. Taken together, the 24 times the non-traditional news releases were published very nearly equals the 28 times the frontrunner "traditional" health issue was published. Finally, the topic published least — the news release dealing with prenatal health care rates was published only four times — is arguably in the mode of a "traditional" children's health issue.

The reach of newspapers — and their ability to shape public opinion and community discourse — is substantial, and the question of whose news releases and which news topics will reach this substantial audience is answered by the gatekeeper-editors. Data here clearly indicate that advocacy agencies can extend the public information / education / advocacy arm of their operations by utilizing publicly available data and relational software to localize news releases. Given that finding, the ability to provide credible, localized health information during today's turbulent times of staff and resource reductions at newspapers cannot be overstated. News organizations producing

newspapers with fewer people and fewer resources may well result in an information gap that health advocacy agencies and organizations are in an ideal position to fill.

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