Sources of Health Articles in Israeli News Sites/

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Abstract:

The media are an important source of information in every part of life. It plays an especially important role in the fields of science and medicine, since "*the media serve as brokers between science and the public, framing social reality for their readers and shaping the public consciousness about science-related events*" (Nelkin, 1987. p.12). The media can influence the flow of research money (Nelkin, 1996) and the number of references scientific papers receive in the literature (Phillips et al., 1991). Because of the media's importance in distributing medical information to the public and the importance of the WWW as a medium of communication, there is a need for a characterization of the health-related information that the web has to offer.

Our study examined the health subsections of the *Ynet* and *NRG* websites, referred to respectively as "New studies" and "Studies and Surveys." Both *Ynet* and *NRG* are highly popular Hebrew news sites. They belong, respectively, to the Yedi'ot Aharonot group and the Maariv group. Our sample includes a total of 151 articles, comprised of 66 articles from *Ynet* and 85 articles from *NRG*, that were collected between October 1, 2007, and April 1, 2008. We tracked the articles' official and unofficial sources, in addition to characterizing them by content and structure measurements. These measurements included the articles' topics, headlines, credits given to researchers, and representation of statistics.

Our study found peer-reviewed scientific journals such as the British *Lancet* and the American *New England Journal of Medicine* to be the most common article sources. The second most common sources were scientific conferences. Other sources varied from government reports to commercial firms' press releases. We found that the average article reports one or two main papers at most, often including general background material and sometimes including specific secondary papers. Both sites use press

releases, new agencies and English news web sites extensively, often giving no or only partial credit. In comparison with *Ynet, NRG*'s "official" (with credit) use of news agencies was a lot more extensive. Common topics for articles in both sites included diet and nutrition, cancer and mental issues. Unlike *NRG*, *Ynet* placed an emphasis on women-related topics, such as pregnancy, birth and breast cancer. Most headlines were sensational, introducing the study's result in a way that left no place for doubt. In comparison with *NRG*, *Ynet* quantified the study results and more often used absolute statistics, which are considered more accurate.

This study's scope was very limited: two subsections of two websites. Therefore, we were unable to statistically validate any conclusions from our content analysis. The wide variety of topics in our sample did not provide a valid enough base for a significant comparison. The study dealt with short articles: 375 words on average on *Ynet* and 425 words on average on *NRG*. It is possible that pattern study of longer articles in various subsections would lead to different findings. For Future research we recommend a study of the complete health sections on both sites for a longer time period. We also recommend a study that will thoroughly research those sections' reliance on sources such as press releases, news agencies and public relations.

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