The Media’s Framing of Health Equity in 2016

September 2017

Key Findings

‣ Unlike other queries that were dominated by media sources and blogs, government entities, academic institutions and medical journals have the highest influence for “health equity.”

‣ Few prominent news sources, organizations, and foundations are heavily involved in the public health and medicine conversation, which demonstrates a gap between the language used to discuss health issues from a disease and public health prevention perspective and the news outlets/advocacy organizations that educate, advocate, or directly lobby on health equity related policy issues.

‣ While the concepts of race and health impact health equity, the topic is referenced by terms such as ethnic, Hispanic and African; the term ‘race’ itself is not as central to the conversation as captured within the query by other Media Cloud tools.

Support for Media Cloud’s work was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.
The conversation around health in America takes on many different tones and covers myriad issues -- to narrow it down to a single element or topic is to synthesize one-fifth of the U.S. economy into a talking point. To better understand the broader issues, Media Cloud and RWJF have partnered to understand the opportunities and obstacles for successfully reframing the U.S. narrative toward a discussion of wellness and away from paradigms that focus primarily--and in some cases exclusively--on illness and disease.

Specifically, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in partnership with the Media Cloud team, have focused on the idea of “health equity” and conversations around population health promotion and disease prevention, incorporating issues of access and equity to frame their understanding. The goal of looking at health through this lens is to answer the following questions:

‣ What narratives are driving the topic of health equity?
‣ Who are the most influential actors in publishing content about health equity?
‣ What agendas and frames are driving online media related to health equity?

Even within this frame, there is broad variance of language, voices, and topics. Moreover, health equity intersects with a number of other public policies, including, but not limited to: insurance coverages, medical and health care systems, education, environmental health, immigration, and infrastructure. Media Cloud’s research seeks to uncover these nuances, identify patterns in coverage of issues and narratives, and look for opportunities to change the narrative by identifying topics, sources, and language that triggers people to think more holistically, and less clinically, about their health and wellness.

The digital media coverage of health equity is about more than disseminating neutral information; it’s an outcome of a larger conversation about access, quality, and affordability of health care, preventative and urgent care, the uninsured and underinsured, and payment reform. And, in this particular equation, both consumers and providers of information operate from unique agendas. Frequently, consumers are looking for more than just information and anecdotes; they are often looking for stories that affirm their opinions and beliefs.

Might we become better informed and more effective advocates if we are able to quantify and make sense of the digital media discourse?

Enter Media Cloud. Media Cloud is an open-source, web-based platform for studying media ecosystems. Their analytical tools help users better understand the opportunities and obstacles for reframing the prevailing media narrative around the issues of the day and the subtext driving it. The tool’s analytics evaluate the media stories, including the narrative framework and the specific word choices, that may influence how people think and that shape their intellectual and emotional response to news stories.
Based on collaborative research between the MIT Center for Civic Media and RWJF Project Officers, an initial query (henceforth “query”) was conceived to conceptualize a “Culture of Health” framework, which views health in a much more comprehensive way; a way that moves beyond a limited medical or clinical understanding of health and that does not focus exclusively on physical health or individual health. A Culture of Health--also referred to as health equity--prioritizes improving everyone’s health, well-being, and equity; to achieve greater health equity we must improve outcomes for everyone, eliminate racialized or gendered health disparities, and focus on community wellness as well as individual health.

To generate this report, we created a query that combines broad concepts that consider health from a holistic approach as it relates to equity across the country. In short, we used a query that includes multiple words and phrases to get an inclusive understanding of health equity in America.

The report should give the reader a better understanding of the digital media landscape surrounding the topic of health equity, and the way that related information is communicated. Media Cloud’s analysis produced interesting findings in terms of frequency, prevalence, and context, which Media Cloud’s tools depict visually in multiple ways.

Pulse
The Media Cloud tool, Pulse, produces a basic line graph (see Figure 1) that plots the number of sentences that refer to the query mentioned above that were published in news articles between June 2015 - June 2016.

Figure 1

As you can see in the above graph, over the course of this time period, there was a semi-regular conversation occurring, with a handful of peaks. Here are some possible reasons for these spikes in coverage:

- September 2015
  - The final Ferguson Commission report and related media attention addressing race as a social determinant of health, followed by the creation of a new set of Sustainable Development Goals.
- October 2015
- The Oct 5th signing by Gov. Jerry Brown (CA) of the ‘End of Life Option Act,’ legislatively allowing the right to prescribe aid-in-dying medication to terminally ill patients
- The Oct 5th start of the 2015 term of the United States Supreme Court, where health-related prospective cases for 2015 included:
  - The necessity for doctors to have admitting privileges in order to provide abortion care;
  - The Affordable Care Act's (ACA) contraceptive mandate; and
  - A reflection of the 2014-2015 term, which included high-profile cases involving the ACA insurance exchanges.

- December 2015
  - A United Nations working group on discrimination against women completed a mission in the United States. The statement released included a section about the rights of women in the United States falling behind international standards, affecting women’s health, safety, and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

- February 2016
  - The death of Antonin Scalia (Feb 13, 2016) and subsequent conversations about how this may affect sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to abortions in the United States.

- April 2016
  - National Center for Health Statistics released a study showing the U.S. suicide rate increased from 1999-2014.

Unlike other Media Cloud queries that cover a single word or phrase, these peaks reflect a more intricate query; there are more words being tracked which has the effect of flattening out the line graph; the peaks are not as extreme because a spike in coverage containing a single word within the query will have a smaller impact than if we were only tracking that term. Given this, we see more consistent coverage over time; nonetheless, there are some key takeaways as it relates to health equity that we can further review.

For example, the narrative around Ferguson has traditionally focused on race relations and racial disparity, but it created a spike in media coverage of health and health equity as a product of racial politics -- a slight paradigm shift in both camps.

October 2015 also highlighted topics of equity, when you consider the broader aggregate conversation in which these examples fall. Individually, each press hit is a social and political victory, depending on your personal, political, and moral views. As a whole, these press hits are being driven by media coverage of court decisions, policies and programs that have the potential to promote greater health equity for all Americans whether it is deciding on your end of life plan or access to care or the outcome of the Supreme Court taking cases that address access to abortion, the ACA's contraceptive mandate, or state insurance exchanges. This lens is also relevant
for understanding the media spike that occurred in February regarding health equity and the passing of Justice Scalia.

The spikes found in both December 2015 and April 2016, while not a major media moment, play into the same conversation and help build buzz around the topic.

**Frequency and Language Use Results**
Frequency of coverage alone does not tell the entire story around health equity. Language is not neutral; words are filled with imagery and emotion and word choice affects the way a message is received and understood by an audience. Much of today’s mainstream media does more than report facts; it attempts to persuade people and influence their beliefs and behaviors through specific messaging, in addition to creating the frame in which they want a topic to be understood.

To more fully understand media coverage about our query, we need to be able to contextualize these articles by looking at a richer, more complex, and more complete data source, one capable of shedding light on the differing word choices media sources uses in conjunction with the words in our query and how that influences the broader narrative. The graphs in Figure 2 below show the words most commonly used in the stories that discuss Health Equity.

**Figure 2**

The above word cloud is indicative of the primary finding in the pulse graph: the terms are representative of a broader, ongoing conversation about the intersection of health and wellness and justice and equity. There are not particular terms that are driving the conversation based on trending topics, breaking news, or newly issued reports; rather they are more generic terms that describe the concept of health equity and do not reflect a dominant news cycle. As evidenced by the sharp peaks and valleys, there is a steady drumbeat of coverage, so it makes sense that the most common words are general terms as opposed to terms specific to a certain news cycle. One will find that the topics are more closely related to issues of equity (e.g., disparities and discrimination are the leading words used), as opposed to descriptors related to one’s physical health.
Content includes the issue of violence in the United States, as well as environmental concerns and immigrant health, particularly as it relates to health issues disproportionately affecting particular groups based on race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomics, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, health equity is looked at more generally, often focused on children or families as opposed to the health of an individual, which further illustrates the idea of equity across large swaths of people or populations.

Surprisingly absent, or at least less common than anticipated, are the terms ‘Medicaid’ and ‘Medicare.’ This potentially implies that content allocated towards health care safety nets for low-income populations or senior citizens is either a) not a dominant topic in the Culture of Health or perhaps b) it the exact term is referenced through implication or discussed broadly, as opposed to direct mention.

While some of these findings may have been expected, knowing the nomenclature, both what is and is not being said, can help shape the narrative going forward, whether it is using similar phrasing or inserting additional context along these lines.

**Source Networks**

Graphics such as those shown above put into perspective how stories are shaped by reporters and the specific language they use. Media Cloud’s suite of tools also allows the user to learn more about how these issues are being talked about in the larger media landscape or the framework for their coverage. One of Media Cloud’s more informative and innovative tools allows users to identify a network of influential sources. This tool can be found in the Topic Mapper section of Media Cloud’s website.

Media Cloud uses a source networking tool to identify and depict media ecosystems for a query based on two criteria: 1) influence and 2) language use. Influence is determined by factors including how many articles in the database link to the story and how frequently it is shared through social media (such as through Facebook), and tracked through other various digital analytics and digital sharing tools. Users can use the Media Cloud website to depict this information in chart form (see figure 3). Similar findings are available for themes, authors, and specific articles. Because of the complexity of this search tool, it might take a day or two to receive the results.

Below, in Figure 3, you can see the most influential sources based on inlinks, or the amount of times that source was referenced to by other outlets for our query.
Unlike other queries that were dominated by media sources and blogs, government entities, academic institutions and medical journals (including National Institutes of Health, Center for Disease Control, Kaiser Family Foundation, New England Journal of Medicine) have the highest influence for “health equity.” This can lead one to assume that this issue is perhaps less political and more academic or research focused.

More specifically, the outlets listed above focus on medical and public health prevention related content, as opposed to advocacy and program implementation. The inclusion of medical journals and academic institutions emphasises the importance of rigorous, peer-reviewed, and scientifically valid research in promoting a comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality of health equity. By comparison,
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mainstream U.S. news sources focused on government policies and aspects of health that broadly impact most Americans, such efforts to repeal the ACA.

Knowing that academic institutions and medical journals are perceived as reputable sources of information on issues related to health equity opens new avenues to move the needle on educating the public about health disparities and health discrimination and to influencing key audiences, including policy makers. Being able to research, author, publish, and disseminate information directly to key audiences reduces the possibility that research findings will be subject to the potential biases of a third-party intermediary or used to promote a particular agenda.

These ideas are further supported by another Media Cloud tool (in Topic Mapper) that breaks down the word use in each of the most influential outlets, as displayed in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

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If you are interested in some of Media Cloud’s more advanced aspects, users can also collaborate with Media Cloud to produce certain types of information in a more complicated graphical form. For example, figure 5 below depicts the word choices of the influential sources by category. The graph below in green (on the right) represents the words popular in Public Health and Medicine literature (i.e. NCBI, CDC, Biomed Central, American Journal of Public Health, New England Journal of Medicine, etc.) whereas the teal graph (on the left) represents mainstream media and outlets covering policy (i.e. Think Progress, New York Times, Washington Post, Economic Policy Institute, etc.).
These graphs provide great insight on how the various actors in the conversation discuss the topic. Few prominent news sources, organizations, and foundations are heavily involved in the public health and medicine conversation, which demonstrates a gap between the language used to discuss health issues from a disease and public health prevention perspective and the news outlets/advocacy organizations that educate, advocate, or directly lobby on health equity related policy issues. Also, despite what one may think, the query did not demonstrate that there were interactions between the words health and race. While the concepts of race and health impact health equity, the topic is referenced by terms such as ethnic, Hispanic and African; the term ‘race’ itself is not as central to the conversation as captured within the query by other Media Cloud tools.

Advocates can use graphs like these to maximize opportunities to influence the narrative by identifying the media sources that are most commonly linked by other sources and therefore central to the development of a particular narrative. These maps are most helpful for following stories that are unfolding online where information is shared by linking to other, key stories.

**Conclusion**
This summary of Media Cloud’s health equity analysis only scratches the surface of what is possible, and the tool is being updated frequently. For the latest information, please visit Media Cloud’s [website](#), [explore the Media Cloud blog where analysts share findings](#), [get on Media Cloud’s mailing list](#), [review the user guide](#), or simply contact Natalie Gyenes at [support@mediacloud.org](mailto:support@mediacloud.org).