

# HEALTH NEWS COVERAGE IN THE U.S. MEDIA

January – June 2009

A REPORT BY

The Kaiser Family Foundation

AND

The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism

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PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

**The Kaiser Family Foundation** is a non-profit private operating foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, dedicated to producing and communicating the best possible analysis and information on health issues.

**The Project for Excellence in Journalism** is an initiative of the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C. and is dedicated to studying the performance of the press, specializing in part in content analysis. The Project is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction
2	Key Findings
7	Conclusion
8	Methodology



## INTRODUCTION

As the Obama Administration begins in earnest its plans to take up health care reform, how the media covers the debate at the outset will influence the public view of the issue and what happens next.

To what extent did health issues get covered in the national press during the first six months of the new Obama Administration? What were the topics and stories driving the coverage? How does the extent and focus of the coverage broadly compare with health news coverage in 2007 and the first half of 2008?

Overall, health news coverage is on the rise. And while attention in the early months of the year was more tied to public health issues like the swine flu and salmonella-tainted peanut butter, media attention to health policy increased sharply in June.

This report covers a six-month time period, from January through June 2009, and updates an [earlier 18-month analysis](#) of January 2007 through June 2008. Both reports were joint projects of the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ). The findings are based on an analysis of coverage of health in 55 different news outlets that were originally sampled as part of PEJ's ongoing News Coverage Index. The study includes the front pages of small, medium and large market newspapers; network TV morning and evening news programs; cable television news; news and talk radio and online news. A total of 1,568 health stories were analyzed for this report.

Key findings include:

- Health news coverage is growing. It represented 4.9% of all coverage studied in the first six months of the year—a 36% increase over the earlier time period of 2007 and the first half of 2008 when it was 3.6% of all coverage studied. Health news kept its spot as the eighth-biggest subject. Health received less than half of the coverage devoted to the economy; nearly one-and-a-half times the coverage of domestic terrorism and more than three times the coverage of race and gender issues, science and technology, environment or education.
- Health policy/the U.S. health care system received the most attention of any health-related topic (40.2% of newshole), followed by coverage of public health issues like the swine flu (35.7%) and coverage of specific diseases or conditions (24.1%). This is a big shift in the focus of health reporting from our earlier study; in 2007 and the first half of 2008, health policy/the health care system was the least-covered aspect of health in the news, while in the current period it is the most prominent health topic in the news.
- The vast majority of health policy coverage had to do with the debate over how to reform health care. It was the biggest single health news story during the first six months of 2009, at 37.5% of the overall health newshole. Most of that coverage came in June when President Obama's health care bill began making its way through Congress. That month, the health care debate story was the fourth-biggest story in the nation.
- The second-biggest health news story was the swine flu outbreak, which garnered 30.2% of all health coverage. The swine flu story peaked in April when it was the fourth-biggest story in the nation. At the height of the coverage, however, during the week of April 27–May 3, swine flu was the number one story in the nation, attracting 31.1% of the total national newshole. The following week (May 4–10), the story was the nation's second-biggest story, with 9.2% of national newshole.
- The single disease to garner the most media attention in the first half of this year was cancer, accounting for 5.9% of all health coverage. The number two condition was mental health, at 2.5%, followed by diabetes/obesity (1.9%).
- The media sectors differed in the attention paid to health news and also in which health news areas they followed most closely. The three commercial evening newscasts primarily covered specific diseases and health conditions, while the PBS *NewsHour* focused on health policy issues. Network morning TV and news Web sites, meanwhile, spent more time on the latest public health outbreaks while newspapers and news radio were more evenly divided in their coverage.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Overall Coverage of Health in the News

Cumulatively, U.S.-related health news accounted for 4.9% of the newshole studied during the first six months of 2009. That put health in the 8th spot among news topics, behind the economy, foreign affairs, business, politics and crime, but ahead of domestic terror, race and gender, science and technology, the environment and education.

But it also represented a 36% increase from the time period (January 2007–June 2008) covered in our earlier study, when health accounted for only 3.6% of national newshole.<sup>1</sup> And, attention to health news seems to be on the rise. During the months of April, May and June, coverage of health issues reached 7.4%, 6.9% and 6.7% respectively, marking the highest monthly levels of attention to health issues of any time over the past two-and-a-half years.

In addition to the intense coverage of the swine flu outbreak in April, some of the increase is due to the political priority the Obama Administration placed on health care reform—a priority that will likely keep health in the news for months to come.

#### TOP ISSUES IN U.S. NEWS MEDIA

(January – June 2009)

Topic	Percent of Newshole
Economy/Economics	13.5%
Government Agencies/Legislatures	12.0
Foreign	11.1
U.S. Foreign Affairs	9.2
Business	9.1
Crime	6.5
Campaigns/Elections/Politics	6.1
Health	4.9
Domestic Terrorism	3.6
Lifestyle	2.7
Miscellaneous	2.5
Domestic Affairs (other)	2.1
Disasters/Accidents	1.8
Media	1.7
Science/Technology	1.6
Race/Gender/Gay Issues	1.6
Court/Legal System	1.6
Sports	1.5
Environment	1.4
Celebrity/Entertainment	1.3
Education	1.3
Defense/Military (domestic)	1.2
Immigration	.6
Transportation	.6
Religion	.4
Development/Sprawl	<.1
TOTAL	100%

### Top Health News Topic Areas

The health news agenda in the first six months of 2009 was overwhelmingly dominated by coverage of health policy/the U.S. health care system and public health issues (primarily the outbreak of swine flu). Together, these issues comprised over three-quarters (75.9%) of the total health news studied.

The largest share of that (40.2%) focused on stories about health policy and the state of the U.S. health care system.

Until June, though, three specific events accounted for most of the attention. The

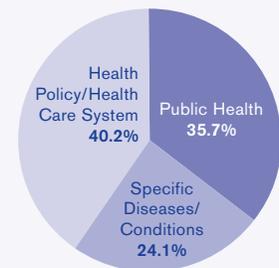
first came in March when Obama named Governor Kathleen Sibelius as Secretary of Health and Human Services. Later that month coverage spiked again during President Obama's health care summit. Then the next

uptick came in May when the President met with health care leaders and sparked a heated nationwide discussion of the single-payer option.

It wasn't until June—when health care reform legislation began making its way through Congress—that health policy became a consistent top theme in the press. The health care debate story was the fourth-biggest story in the nation in the month of June, attracting 5.7% of the total national newshole. And that level of attention remained consistent throughout the month, ranking between seventh and third nationally each of the four weeks.

The second-biggest health topic—potential epidemics and other public health concerns—comprised 35.7% of health news coverage over the first six months of 2009. Most notable were the outbreaks of peanut butter-related salmonella in January and of swine flu in April and May. The swine flu story peaked in April, when it was, overall, the fourth-biggest story in the nation. At the height of the coverage, however, during the week of April 27–May 3, swine flu was the number one story, attracting 31.1% of the total newshole. The following week (May 4–10), the story was still the nation's second-biggest story, filling 9.2% of the national newshole.

#### HEALTH NEWS TOPIC AREAS



<sup>1</sup> We also broke down the prior time period into six-month increments and examined the second half of 2008. Even then, 2009 still has the greatest percentage devoted to health news. Jan. – June 2007=4.1%; July – Dec. 2007 =3.8%; Jan. – June 2008=2.9%; July – Dec. 2008=2.6%.

Stories about specific diseases and conditions, disease prevention and medical research rounded out the news coverage with 24.1% of the health newshole. The two individual storylines to garner the most coverage within this topic were that of Daniel Hauser (the Minnesota teen who sought to avoid chemotherapy), and precautions to take against flu-related illness.

The single disease to garner the most media attention was cancer, accounting for 5.9% of all health coverage. The number two condition was mental health at 2.5%, followed by diabetes/obesity at 1.9%. While cancer had also topped the list in the earlier time period, mental health had only ranked 6th.

#### PERCENT OF HEALTH NEWSHOLE FOR SELECTED DISEASES AND CONDITIONS

Disease/Condition	Jan. 2007 – June 2008	Jan. 2009 – June 2009
Cancer	10.1%	5.9%
Obesity/Diabetes	5.2	1.9
Heart Disease	3.9	1.0
HIV/AIDS	2.2	.3
Autism	2.2	.9
Mental Health Conditions	1.6	2.5
Alzheimer's	.6	.7
ALS	<.1	.4

Media attention to specific diseases and conditions did not fluctuate to the same degree as the coverage of health policy/the U.S. health care system or public health. Still, the peak month of coverage clearly came in February. That month, specific diseases and conditions accounted for 45.4% of the health newshole.

Several specific storylines contributed to the increased focus in February—a court in Washington state ruled that there was no link between childhood immunizations and autism; a two-year National Institutes of Health study determined that the key to losing weight is not in following any one particular diet, but rather in sticking to any diet at all and merely eating less; a joint American-British study suggested that the incidence of many cancers could be reduced by following a healthier lifestyle; and the Army began to investigate the suicides of 24 soldiers from January, many of whom had served in Iraq.

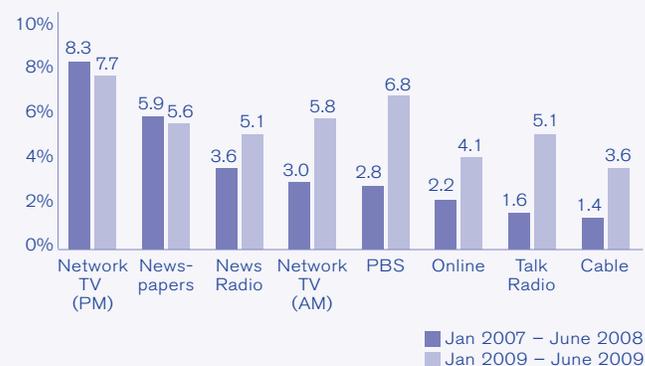
For the first six months of 2009, the overall proportion of these three major areas of health news—health policy and the health care system; public health; and specific diseases—changed rather dramatically from the trends identified in the 18 months studied in 2007 and 2008. Then, issues concerning specific diseases led the coverage at 41.7% with cancer alone accounting for 10.1% of all health coverage. This was followed by public health at 30.9%. And discussion of health policy and the health care system accounted for the smallest proportion, 27.4%.

In the first six months of 2009, health policy and the health care system led with 40.2% of the coverage. Still, though, it was not until June that this area gained prominence. From January through May, public health (driven largely by the swine flu outbreak) dominated the coverage.<sup>2</sup>

#### Coverage of Health by Media Sector

Network evening news offered the most health news coverage (7.7% of newshole) of any single media sector, just as it did in 2007 and the first half of 2008 (8.3%). The PBS *NewsHour* ranked second at 6.8% (and up from its rank of 5th previously). Cable, on the other hand, continued to devote the least attention to health news, when compared to the other genres.

#### PERCENT OF NEWSHOLE DEVOTED TO HEALTH, BY MEDIA SECTOR



<sup>2</sup> From Jan. – May 2009, public health accounted for 42.7% of coverage, followed by health policy at 29.4% and specific diseases and conditions at 27.9%.

Some clear differences also emerged in the specific storylines that different media followed.

Broadcast TV, for instance, offered three distinct perspectives on health news in the first half of the year. The three commercial evening newscasts continued to primarily cover specific diseases and health conditions. Public television, by contrast, focused on health policy issues. Meanwhile, network morning TV devoted more time to the latest public health outbreaks, as did online news Web sites.

News radio and newspapers offered the most evenly divided coverage among the three broad health areas. Talk radio—or one particular talk show host—devoted near singular attention to health policy. And cable TV shifted from focusing mainly on public health outbreaks in 2007 and 2008 to discussing health reform in 2009.

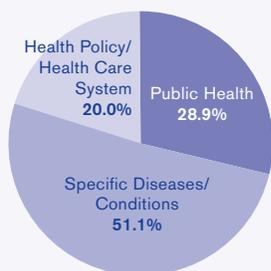
### Network Evening News

During the first half of 2009, the three network evening news programs solidified trends identified in the 2007 and 2008 analysis.

First, network evening news programs continued to devote the greatest percentage of their overall programming to health news among the genres studied (7.7%), though the gap has narrowed somewhat.

Second, the nightly newscasts on the traditional broadcast channels continued to dedicate more than half of their health newshole (51.1%) to coverage of specific diseases or medical conditions. Cancer again received the most attention, with 13.8% of newshole, followed by heart disease (6%) and mental health (4.5%).

HEALTH NEWS COVERAGE IN NETWORK EVENING NEWS



Diabetes/obesity (2.8%), autism (2.6%) and Alzheimer’s (2.1%) were the next most prominent in network coverage. Most of the attention to Alzheimer’s came in late March, when each of

the three networks covered Maria Shriver’s testimony before Congress on how the disease was affecting her father’s life.

Network evening news devoted 28.9% of health newshole to coverage of public health issues. Over half of this coverage centered on the swine flu outbreak, but other storylines received attention as well, at least early on in the year. On February 17, for example, *NBC Nightly News* aired a report on child vaccines—parents choosing to opt out and experts warning of potential consequences.

At 20.0% of health newshole, these evening news programs delivered the least coverage of all media sectors to health policy/the U.S. health care system.

Most of the health coverage here came well into the newscasts. Just 6.3% of health stories led the evening program while the overwhelming proportion (83.3%) appeared much later in the broadcast.

### PBS

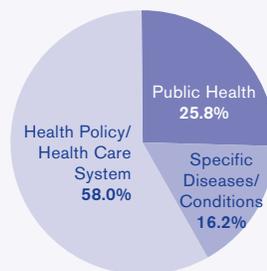
PBS’ *NewsHour* ranked second in coverage of health news, devoting 6.8% of its overall newshole to these issues.

In stark contrast to the network evening news programs, however, the *NewsHour* dedicated nearly three times as much of its health newshole to coverage of health policy/the U.S. health care system (58%)—second only to talk radio in attention to this subject.

While the program examined the health care debate from several angles, it turned most often to the issue of cost: the recession’s impact on the ability to afford co-pays; increases in applications for Medicaid; healthcare businesses agreeing to cut costs; or how stimulus funds were helping to keep community health centers open.

The *NewsHour* spent approximately one quarter of its health newshole (25.8%) on public health stories—almost exclusively on the swine flu—and only 16.2% on coverage of specific diseases and conditions. Cancer was the only specific disease to figure prominently in PBS coverage (3%).

HEALTH NEWS COVERAGE ON PBS



### Network Morning News

The three network morning programs collectively devoted 5.8% of their programming to health news, with a different emphasis than their evening counterparts. Here, public health concerns received the greatest attention (44.3% of newshole, second only to the online sector).

The swine flu outbreak dominated the public health newshole on all three networks, with stories such as a CBS *Early Show* interview on April 27 with a family in Texas who had three members suffering from the flu. And in late May, a report on ABC's *Good Morning America* discussed renewed fears of the H1N1 virus and new school closings. Specific diseases and health conditions accounted for about a third (32.3%) of the coverage. As seen in the evening network programs, cancer was the single disease to receive the most attention (9.9%), followed by Alzheimer's (1.8%) and heart disease (1.5%).

The U.S. health care system and the debate over health reform attracted 23.4% of morning network health newshole, almost half as much attention as was given to public health scares. Coverage of this topic, however, was very lopsided among the three morning programs: over half of the genre's coverage of health policy/the U.S. health care system appeared on ABC's *Good Morning America* (56.7%), followed by the *Today* show (26.8%) and the *Early Show* (16.5%).

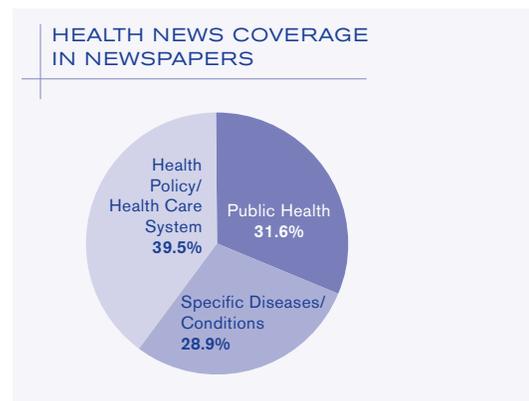
When it came to placement of these health stories, just 10.9% were the lead item of the day, less than any sector except network evening news and news radio.

### Newspapers

Newspaper front pages in the first half of 2009 offered some of the most evenly divided coverage across the three health news topic areas.

The greatest proportion focused on health policy/the U.S. health care system, which accounted for 39.5% of the coverage, followed by public health concerns at 31.6% and specific diseases and conditions at 28.9%. On April 27, the *Meadville Tribune* (PA) ran three separate page-one stories, all from the AP wire service: a lead public health story on efforts to contain the swine flu outbreak; a mental health story about a new anti-Attention Deficit Disorder drug that can aid in test performance; and a story about cancer, focusing on disagreement among doctors about whether prostate cancer screen tests are effective.

Newspapers stood out for devoting more health newshole than any other sector to mental health issues (6.2%)—including the story mentioned above in the *Meadville Tribune* and a long profile piece in the *New York Times* on January 2 about post-traumatic stress disorder and suicides among Iraq war veterans. Newspapers also dedicated the most newshole to ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease (1.6%). On May 17, the *New York Times* ran a 3,533-word article chronicling the efforts of one mother over a period of three years to obtain the ALS drug Iplex for her son.



The newspaper sector ranked highest among all media in placing health stories as the lead (21.8%).

### News Radio

The news radio content studied for this report—NPR's *Morning Edition* and radio headline news—devoted 5.1% of its overall news agenda to health issues. Of all of the media sectors studied, news radio displayed the most balance among the three major topic areas: 35.5% dedicated to the health care system, 34% to specific diseases and conditions and 30.5% to public health concerns.

News radio also devoted the most attention of any media sector to both diabetes and obesity (3.9%) and HIV/AIDS (2.4%). Most of this coverage occurred on NPR, with stories like its February 26 report on a Harvard study which found that success in dieting depends more on support and counseling than on counting fat. News radio ranked third among all media sectors in attention to mental health (4.5%), again largely based on reports that aired on *Morning Edition*. Other than talk radio, news radio programming devoted the least amount of newshole to cancer (2.8%).

### Talk Radio

Talk radio dedicated 5.1% of its overall newshole to health with the overwhelming proportion of this (85.1%) focused on health policy/the U.S. health care system. But attention to the health care system was far from evenly divided among the hosts.

Liberal Ed Schultz alone accounted for 75.1% of the newshole devoted to health policy/the U.S. health care system, focusing almost exclusively on the need for the single-payer option, sometimes suggesting that President Obama needed to be reminded of his earlier statements on the topic. The other liberal host studied, Randi Rhodes, accounted for 8.7%.

Collectively, the conservative talk radio hosts accounted for only 16.2% of the genre's attention to health policy/the U.S. health care system. Sean Hannity led with 9.7% of this newshole, followed by Rush Limbaugh (5.2%) and Michael Savage (1.3%). When these hosts focused on the issue, the discussion dealt more with the politics of reform than with the substance of the proposals, suggesting that Democrats might purposely use misleading statistics to press their case, accusing the President of politicizing the swine flu outbreak, or insisting that, ultimately, higher taxes would be necessary to pay for the intended reforms.

Public health concerns attracted 8.2% of health newshole on talk radio, and specific diseases or conditions occupied only 6.8%.

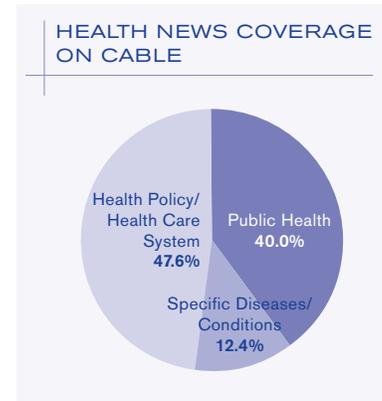
### Online

The online media sector, with 4.1% of its total news agenda spent on health issues, stood out in two specific areas. First, the online outlets studied devoted the greatest percent of any sector to public health issues and events (45.5%), even outpacing network morning news. And the vast majority of that coverage (84.5%) focused on the swine flu outbreak.

Online media were second only to network evening news (2.6%) in their coverage of autism (2.5% of the total health newshole). All of the coverage appeared in the month of February, and largely on the Web site CNN.com. Half of the autism coverage focused on the ruling by a special court that there was insufficient evidence to prove a link between childhood vaccinations and autism. The other half of the coverage highlighted a group called Autism Partnership that offers therapeutic services to both children and adults affected by the condition.

### Cable

While still devoting the least programming of any media sector to health (3.6%), the focus of cable's coverage shifted from the 2007 and 2008 time period to 2009. Earlier, public health scares like the tuberculosis-infected traveler and salmonella-tainted produce dominated, while so far in 2009 the greatest focus has been health policy matters.



Nearly half of cable health newshole in early 2009 was dedicated to health policy and the U.S. health care system (47.6%), behind only talk radio (85.1%) and PBS *NewsHour* (58%). Most of this coverage (63.0%) fell in the evening hours studied (5–8 pm), followed by night programming (8–11 pm) at 18.6%, and daytime (2–5 pm) at 18.4%.

Public health issues filled 40% of the health newshole on the cable programming studied for this report. The outbreak of swine flu dominated cable's public health newshole, accounting for 81.1% of their coverage of this topic.

Specific diseases and conditions attracted only 12.4% of cable health newshole, but more than one-third of this was devoted to cancer (4.3% overall). The cancer coverage was driven largely by the case of Daniel Hauser, the Minnesota teen who fled with his mother in order to avoid having to undergo chemotherapy. Mental health (1.1%) and diabetes and obesity (1.2%) were the other specific conditions attracting the most attention on cable.

## CONCLUSION

With President Obama and Congress making the debate over health care reform a top priority, the media's attention to health news increased, and coverage shifted from a focus on specific diseases and conditions to a focus on health policy and the state of the U.S. health care system.

Overall, health news coverage increased 36 percent (comprising roughly five percent of all news coverage) compared to health news coverage during 2007 and the first half of 2008. Health ranked as the eighth most covered news topic by the media. The economy was the top-ranked topic in the news, garnering more than twice the coverage of health topics.

News about health policy/the U.S. health care system dominated coverage, garnering 40% of the health newshole. Public health (36%) was the second most covered topic, led by news of the swine flu outbreak. About a quarter (24%) of all health news focused on specific diseases or conditions. This reflects a substantial shift in the nature of health coverage from the previous study, when news concerning specific diseases dominated coverage of health with roughly 42 percent, followed by public health at 31 percent and finally health policy and the U.S. health care system at 27 percent.

Network evening news offered the most health news coverage of any single media sector, as it did in 2007 and the first six months of 2008, while cable television continued to devote the least attention to health news. The media sectors in the study present a different mix of health news coverage. For example, on network TV, the evening newscasts are primarily focused on specific diseases and medical conditions, morning TV focused more on the latest public health outbreaks and public TV focused on health policy issues. News radio and newspapers offered the most evenly divided coverage among the three broad health areas.

As the debate over health reform continues, the amount and nature of coverage the news media provides could play a critical role in the evolution of public opinion. So far this year, news media have increased the amount of space they dedicate to coverage of health in general, and have increased their focus on health policy in particular. Traditional news platforms such as network evening news, PBS, and newspapers, continue to offer more coverage of health than newer (and increasingly popular) platforms such as cable or online news.

## METHODOLOGY

The Kaiser Family Foundation and the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) conducted a study of how the U.S. media covered health issues over a six month period—from January through June 2009. The analysis was based on coding conducted for PEJ's weekly News Coverage Index (NCI). Over the six-month period, PEJ researchers coded 34,004 stories as a part of the NCI. These stories span across five media sectors, including newspapers, online, network TV, cable TV, and radio. The universe of stories was coded by a team made up of 17 trained coders, a coding administrator, and a senior research methodologist. The complete methodology of the NCI is available here: [www.journalism.org/about\\_news\\_index/methodology](http://www.journalism.org/about_news_index/methodology).

This report aggregates and further analyzes the subset of 1,568 health-related stories during that time. The sample includes 220 stories from newspapers, 139 stories from online Web sites, 541 stories from network TV, 321 stories from cable, and 347 stories from radio.

PEJ monitors 55 different news outlets each week Monday–Friday, and Sunday newspapers, including:

### Newspapers

A rotating group of seven newspapers a day, ranging from the *Anniston Star* and *San Jose Mercury News* to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, and *New York Times*. All stories on the front page with a national or international focus are captured and coded.

### Broadcast Network Television Evening News Shows

The entirety of ABC's *World News Tonight*, CBS's *Evening News*, and NBC's *Nightly News* are captured and coded every weekday. A half hour of every episode of PBS's *Newshour with Jim Lehrer* was captured and coded, with coding alternating between the first and the second half-hour of the show.

### Broadcast Network Television Morning News Shows

Every Monday to Friday the first 30 minutes of ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *Early Show*, and NBC's *Today* show were captured and coded.

### Daytime Cable News

Every weekday, a half-hour of news from two of the following channels was recorded between 2-2:30 p.m. ET: CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.

### Evening Cable News

Every weekday, the first half-hour of a rotating schedule of six news programs from CNN, Fox and MSNBC were recorded and coded, ranging from CNN's *Lou Dobbs Tonight* and *Anderson Cooper 360*, to Fox News's *O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity* to MSNBC's *Hardball* and *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*.

### Radio News Headlines

Twice a day (at 9 a.m. and again at 5 p.m. every Monday to Friday), all news headlines from ABC and CBS radio were captured and coded, as was a half-hour of NPR's *Morning Edition*, with coding alternating between the first half-hour of the first hour, and the first half-hour of the second hour.

### Talk Radio

Every day, the first half-hour of a rotating selection of two or three different talk shows was recorded and coded, ranging from Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage to Ed Schultz and Randi Rhodes.

### Online News

Once a day (Monday to Friday), the top five stories on a rotating schedule of the following news sites were captured and coded: CNN.com, Yahoo News, MSNBC.com, Google News, Foxnews.com, USAToday.com, NYTimes.com, AOL News, Washingtonpost.com, ABCNews.com, BBC News (international version), and Reuters.com.

Stories were considered to be "health-related" if the content of the story was about one of these broad story categories:

### Health Policy/U.S. Health Care System

This category includes stories about health reform; Medicare, Medicaid, and other government health programs; health insurance; health care costs; information technology; medical training; and other issues related to the integrity of the health care system generally.

### Public Health

This category includes stories that focus on the impact of health conditions on groups of people, such as stories about pandemics, epidemics, bird flu, and environmental health concerns.

### Specific Diseases/Conditions

This category includes stories that discuss the causes, effects, or treatment of specific health conditions. Stories about medical research are included here. This category includes separate codes for:

- ALS
- Alzheimer's
- Autism
- Cancer
- Diabetes/Obesity
- Heart Disease
- HIV/AIDS
- Mental Health
- Other Diseases/Conditions





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