

About Berkeley Media Studies Group

Berkeley Media Studies Group is a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding advocates' ability to improve the systems and structures that determine health. A project of the Public Health Institute, we analyze the news to learn how the media characterize health issues, and we harness lessons from our research to help advocates become strong voices in national conversations about health.

Why study the news?

News coverage is important because it sets the agenda for public policy debates. Journalists' decisions about which topics to cover — and which to omit — influence whether an issue becomes a part of public discourse or remains hidden from view. What's more, the way issues are portrayed in the news affects the public's and policymakers' understanding of those issues and what to do about them.

Our commitment to health equity

The problem: Name just about any disease or health problem and, chances are, low-income people or people of color are more likely to suffer from it. Yet historically, the mass media have largely ignored the connection between power (social, economic and political) and health. Instead, they have presented health issues in medical terms, with a focus on personal health habits, physician heroics or technological breakthroughs. Similarly, social and health programs often focus on giving people skills to beat the odds rather than changing the structural barriers to having successful and healthy lives. Though individual behavior plays a role in health, in the long run, it makes more sense — and is more just — to eliminate barriers and change the odds so that everyone can be healthy.

The path to success: Real improvements in health will not come so much from increases in personal health knowledge or changes in individual behaviors as from improvements in social conditions. Policies that improve access to affordable housing, healthy food, quality early care and education, and safe neighborhoods, to name a few, all help people live healthy lives.

BMSG's connection: At BMSG, we work with advocates to shift power away from the status quo back to their communities. We do this by helping advocates develop or fine-tune their strategies so they can make better use of the media to influence how policy makers think about health and advance policies that improve the social determinants of health.



If the public's information came only from the media, what would they know?

What wouldn't they know?



Our services

Consultation: Organizations that want to change policy or influence decision-makers enlist BMSG to help them develop a media advocacy plan, a message strategy, and an access strategy for becoming part of the public debate in the news media. We help public health advocates plan strategic media opportunities and provide feedback and coaching during every step of implementation, from writing letters to the editor to refining their overall strategy.

Research: Our research falls into two categories. For advocates in the field, we deliver a variety of policy-oriented materials, such as framing briefs and case studies. These documents offer incisive, timely analyses of how much coverage a public health issue is getting, how it is being framed in news or marketing media, and how effectively advocates have used the media to further their policy agenda. We also publish content analyses for the academic and policy communities. These projects use scientific methods to explore in greater depth the nature and extent of a public health issue's coverage and framing.

Media advocacy trainings: BMSG offers strategic communication trainings for advocates, community groups, youth leaders and others interested in shifting the public debate on health or other social justice issues. Our trainings are designed to help participants build the skills and capacity they need to make the case for policies that improve public health. We offer introductory trainings for those new to media advocacy as well as more advanced options for seasoned advocates.

Journalist education: Part of BMSG's mission is to help journalists improve their coverage of public health issues by asking better questions about the real rates, causes and solutions of public health problems. Although journalist education is the smallest component of BMSG's work, we have partnered with journalists and journalism professors to create tools and bring training on public health perspectives directly into newsrooms.

Contact

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