

Latest UCSD research shows importance of lay press in dissemination of medical knowledge to scientific community

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NEW UCSD RESEARCH SHOWS IMPORTANCE OF LAY PRESS IN DISSEMINATION OF MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE TO SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

A new University of California, San Diego study shows that news coverage in major print media may play a greater role than previously believed in disseminating important medical knowledge to the scientific community. The study, conducted by UCSD Sociology Professor David Phillips, was published in the Oct. 17, 1991 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM).

"Many members of the scientific and medical communities have long assumed that the communication of discoveries to researchers and physicians flows only through scientific journals and other esoteric channels," said Phillips. "This research shows that new medical and scientific findings that are published in scientific journals and retransmitted in the lay press may receive a disproportionate share of attention within the biomedical community."

Phillips' research is based on published scientific articles in the NEJM and their retransmission in The New York Times. He and his collaborators Elliot Kanter, a reference librarian at the UCSD Central Library, and UCSD undergraduate students Bridget Bednarczyk and Patricia Tastad, focused their efforts on research in the NEJM because The Times devoted far more attention to it than to any other scientific journal. The Times, said Phillips, may generate more attention than any other newspaper because it has one of the largest daily circulations and because many other media follow its lead when selecting stories to publicize.

"What we sought to determine is whether the NEJM articles publicized by The Times received a disproportionate number of scientific citations in the decade following their publication. We also sought to discover whether coverage by The Times genuinely increased the impact of an article or whether it merely earmarked outstanding articles which would have garnered substantial citations even without The Times coverage," Phillips explained.

Phillips' primary findings are based on a comparison of citations received by NEJM articles (published in 1979) which were publicized in The Times, with those received by articles not publicized by The Times but appearing in the same category in the same issue of the NEJM.

The comparison revealed that NEJM articles publicized by The New York Times in 1979 consistently received significantly more scientific citations in each of the ten calendar years following their publication than did the NEJM articles which were not publicized by The Times. In fact, in the first year after publication, the NEJM articles publicized in The Times received 73 percent more citations in scientific and medical publications than did their unpublicized counterparts.

In order to test the alternative hypothesis that The Times was merely earmarking important NEJM articles that would have garnered substantial recognition in the scientific and medical communities regardless of The Times'

coverage, Phillips conducted a secondary analysis of the NEJM articles published during a 3- month strike period at The Times in 1978. During The Times strike, which lasted from August to November 1978, the newspaper continued to print a reduced edition of record but did not sell copies to the public. So, during the strike period, The Times continued to earmark NEJM articles it deemed worthy, but the newspaper did not publicize this information to its readership.

This secondary analysis compared the citations received by NEJM articles earmarked by The Times with those received by NEJM articles not earmarked by The Times during the strike.

According to Phillips, this secondary analysis disproves the alternative theory that The Times merely earmarks noteworthy articles that would receive a great deal of attention from the scientific and medical communities regardless of The Times' coverage.

"These findings seem to occur because The Times enhances the transmission of information from the NEJM to the biomedical community," remarked Phillips. "Coverage in The New York Times is likely to draw attention to published research, even before the NEJM issue itself has been read by individual subscribers. Regular readers of these publications might be exposed to the research findings twice, while others who do not routinely read the NEJM might be drawn to a particular article only after reading it in The Times."

According to Phillips, the evidence suggests that a lay publication -- The New York Times -- serves as an important filtering mechanism for medical researchers and scientists for reducing and filtering what would otherwise be an overwhelming flow of scientific information. The "Times filter," he adds, seems to have a marked and persistent effect for at least ten years after a NEJM article appears.

Phillips said that his future research will seek to determine if the use of such lay filters prompts some researchers to overemphasize certain medical articles while deemphasizing others, and whether the lay press not only amplifies but also distorts the transmission of medical information to the biomedical community.

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