

Negative, localized online news garners more attention, study finds

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According to the "hardwired for news" theory, people devote more attention to information that is deviant or threatening. To test the theory, University of Missouri researchers examined the physiological effects of reading threatening health news online. The researchers found that news about local health threats increased attention and memory in readers more than news about distant, or non-local, health threats.

"Although journalists have often prioritized negative and local stories, there has been limited evidence to support that approach until now," said Kevin Wise, assistant professor of strategic communication in the MU School of Journalism. "This study provides physiological evidence that supports both the practice of localizing news stories and the idea that people allocate more attention to negative news with a local focus."

This study is one of only a few that used physiological response to examine how people respond to reading text. The results indicate that people have an innate mechanism that enables more attention to be given to information that is localized and negative, Wise said.

"It seems ironic, but the majority of the time that people spend online is spent reading text," Wise said. "Therefore, identifying how people process and respond to text is critical to understanding the cognitive and emotional processing of all interactive media."

In the study, Wise measured the physiological responses, including heart rate, of participants as they read news stories about either local or distant

health threats. He found that reading high-proximity, or local, health news elicited slower heart rate than low-proximity news, an indication that more cognitive resources were allocated to the local news.

Additionally, participants more accurately recalled details from local health threats compared to distant threats.

"It's logical to assume that people will be more likely to take protective or preventative action after reading about a local health threat," Wise said. "If journalists can increase the awareness of threats in local communities, then people will have opportunities to act upon that information."

The study, "Exploring the Hardwired for News Hypothesis: How Threat Proximity Affects Cognitive and Emotional Processing of Health-Related Print [News](#)," was published in the July-August 2009 issue of *Communication Studies*.

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