

Study Finds Media May Be Overhyping Benefits Of Organic Food, Agriculture

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(PhysOrg.com) -- News accounts of organic agriculture and organic food are more likely to be positive than negative and inaccurately claim organic food is safer, according to Kansas State University's Doug Powell.

Powell, an associate professor of food safety, is the co-author of "Coverage of organic agriculture in North American newspapers: [Media](#) -- linking food safety, the environment, human health and organic agriculture," just published in the British Food Journal.

The paper is based on a study Powell conducted from 1999-2004 with two colleagues at the University of Guelph in Canada, Stacey Cahill and Katija Morley. Cahill was one of Powell's students at the time.

The team explored how topics of organic food and agriculture were discussed in five North American newspapers. Using the content analysis technique, the 618 articles collected were analyzed for topic, tone and theme regarding food safety, environmental concerns and human health.

The prominent topics of the articles were genetic engineering, pesticides and [organic farming](#), Powell said.

The analysis found 41.4 percent of the articles had a neutral tone toward organic agriculture and food, 36.9 percent had a positive tone, 15.5 percent were mixed and 6.1 percent were negative, Powell said.

"We concluded that articles about organic production in the selected time period were seldom negative," he said. "Organic agriculture was often portrayed in the media as an alternative to allegedly unsafe and environmentally damaging modern agriculture practices. That means organic was being defined by what it isn't, rather than what it is."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has repeatedly stated that the organic standard is a verification of production methods and not a food safety claim, Powell said.

"[Food safety](#) was the least important in the media discussion of organic agriculture," Powell said. "The finding that 50 percent of food safety-themed statements in news articles were positive with respect to organic agriculture, while 81 percent of health-themed statements and 90 percent of environment-themed statements were positive toward organic food, indicates an uncritical press."

Analysis of articles over time, among media outlets and by topic, allows for understanding of media reporting on the subject and provides insight into the way the public is influenced by news coverage of [organic food](#) and agriculture, Powell said.

More information: The article is available at:
www.emeraldinsight.com/journal ... 871116&show=abstract

Provided by Kansas State University

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