

News narratives can heighten compassion, increase willingness to act

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How the news media tell a story can make those who consume the story more compassionate and willing to act and help others.

According to Penn State researchers, [news reports](#) can boost [empathy](#) toward stigmatized groups, particularly if they go beyond factual information to include stories that more effectively trigger [emotional responses](#).

When news reports focus on individuals and their stories, rather than simply facts or policy, readers experience greater feelings of compassion, said Penn State Distinguished Professor Mary Beth Oliver, co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory and a member of the Department of Film-Video and Media Studies. This compassion also extends to feelings about [social groups](#) in general, including groups that are often stigmatized.

"Issues such as health care, poverty and discrimination all should elicit compassion," Oliver said. "But presenting these issues as personalized stories more effectively evokes emotions that lead to greater caring, [willingness](#) to help and interest in obtaining more information."

Oliver and co-authors James P. Dillard, Keunmin Bae and Daniel Tamul published their findings in the latest issue of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*.

In their research, people read news stories about health-care issues for

the elderly, immigrants or people in prison. Half of the stories focused on health-care policy only, while half presented narratives about specific people who were facing health-care issues.

"Personalizing a policy issue in terms of an individual's story is not only more engaging, but it is also more effective at increasing compassion that ultimately leads to broader changes in attitudes and even changes in behaviors," Oliver said.

The research showed that emotional responses to a news story lead to greater [compassion](#) for the stigmatized group represented in the story, more reported willingness to help the group and increased tendencies to seek additional information about organizations advocating for the group's welfare.

"The news is often stereotyped as presenting only bad news and creating harmful attitudes," Oliver said. "But our research tells us that it also holds promise of addressing issues of social change."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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