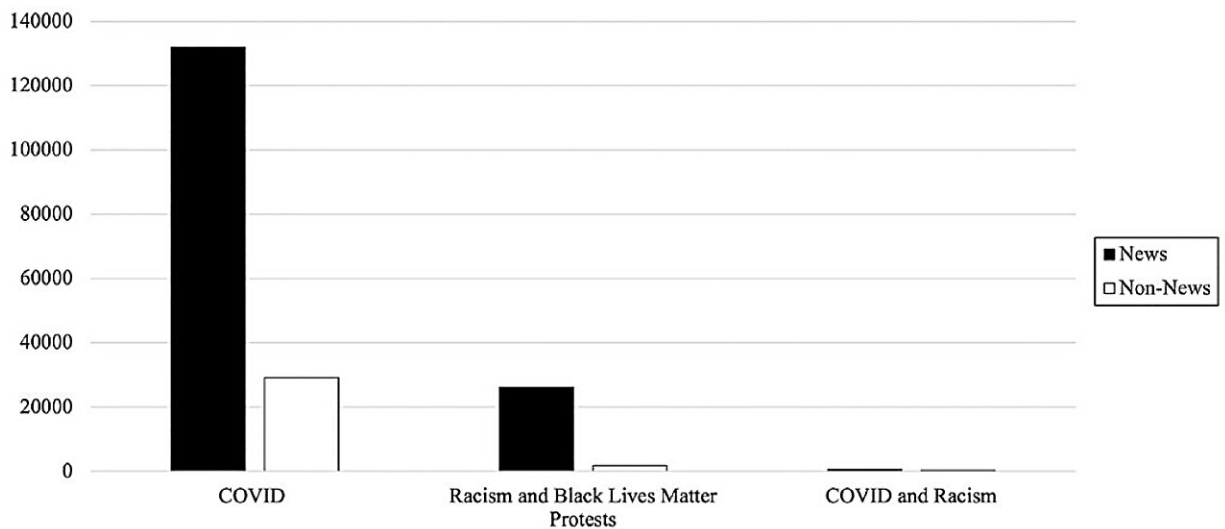


Study shows news organizations still lead in sharing difficult information on social media

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Total Dictionary Mentions by News versus Non-News Organizations. Credit: *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2024). DOI: 10.1177/00027162231214398

As media organizations across the country fold and news deserts grow, it remains to be seen who will tell the tough stories and ask difficult questions traditionally posed by journalists.

Social media provides an opportunity for [community organizations](#) and leaders to take that role, but a new study shows that in the case of difficult conversations regarding racial disparities and the COVID-19

pandemic, news outlets still take the lead in sharing such information.

The pandemic saw pronounced [health disparities](#) and negative outcomes falling disproportionately on communities of color. That happened around the same time as the murder of George Floyd and resulting protests for racial justice across the country. Those concurrent events provided an opportunity to examine how organizations discussed a difficult topic, said Christopher Etheridge, assistant professor of journalism & [mass communications](#) at the University of Kansas.

"This raises some interesting questions like, 'What civic conversations are taking place online as organizations become increasingly reliant on social media to communicate?'" said Etheridge, a contributor to the project. "If everyone has their own Facebook page to control the message, are the difficult conversations necessary to a healthy community taking place?"

Researchers from the Civic Infrastructure Lab at Michigan State University and colleagues conducted two studies to examine the question.

They analyzed more than 1,250 Facebook posts made by civic organizations, including news outlets, nonprofits, community organizations, [public libraries](#), universities, and local public Facebook groups from March 2020 to September 2021. They also interviewed 17 communications managers from the organizations about what they posted and the strategy behind those decisions.

Data showed that 14.5% of posts mentioned the pandemic and 2.5% mentioned racism and/or Black Lives Matter, though only .06 percent of posts from across the organizations mentioned racial or health disparities pertaining to COVID-19.

Of those, nearly 70% were made by news organizations, followed by nonprofits at 29.7%, health organizations with about 5%, government officials at 1.7%, educational organizations at 1.2%, politicians at 1%, and civic service organizations at .31%. Libraries and neighborhood groups made no such posts.

The post-analysis and interviews were conducted within six communities in the Great Lakes region: Flint and Lansing, Michigan; Bemidji and Duluth, Minnesota; and Gary and South Bend, Indiana. The communities were chosen for a high variation of racial diversity of residents, number of local news outlets, and metrics of economic equality.

"We didn't see a ton of conversations about health disparities even among organizations where that might be a part of their mission," Etheridge said. "We thought the summer of 2020 might be an opportunity for these organizations to raise topics connected to health and race, but we found people hesitant in part because of the perception that there is already so much negativity, trolling, and unpleasant comments already out there."

The paper, published in the [Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science](#), was co-written by Ava Francesca Battocchio, Kjerstin Thorson, Dan Hiaeshutter-Rice, Marisa Smith, Hyesun Choung, Chuqing Dong and Moldir Moldagaliyeva of Michigan State University; Yingying Chen of Renmin University of China; Stephanie Edgerly of Northwestern University; and Kelley Cotter of Pennsylvania State University.

The researchers also conducted interviews with storytellers on how they decide the content to share via their [social media](#) channels. The communications managers indicated they were aware of racial health disparities and COVID-19, but outside of news organizations, they understood their role in creating content regarding race and health

disparities in different ways.

Interviewees said they were concerned about their organization's reputation and that their financial well-being could be negatively affected if their reputation suffered from posting about controversial issues. They also indicated hesitancy to impugn the reputation of their community by implying social inequity was a problem there, the study found.

And while managers indicated they were aware of [racial disparities](#) in health outcomes, few respondents indicated they saw it as a problem in their own community, the study found.

Interviewees from news organizations said that they saw their role differently and that they had a responsibility to share information about disparities in health and injustice, even if it was uncomfortable or difficult to accept, the study found.

"Non-news organizations didn't say, 'We need to be leading public thinking on these topics,'" Etheridge said. "A lot of people were craving engagement but didn't want to have conversations online that could turn nasty or negative. News organizations recognized that having tough conversations was part of their mission, shining light on these issues in a public way. So this leads us to wonder what happens if these news organizations go away or shrink in size."

The pandemic coinciding with renewed attention to systemic racism in the wake of Floyd's murder provided a unique opportunity to "stress test" local civic information infrastructure, the researchers wrote, and the findings validate the importance of local journalism to facilitate difficult, yet necessary conversations.

More information: Ava Francesca Battocchio et al, Who Will Tell the

Stories of Health Inequities? Platform Challenges (and Opportunities) in Local Civic Information Infrastructure, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00027162231214398](https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231214398)

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