

RESEARCH BRIEF

The Woodhull Study Revisited: Nurses' Representation in Health News Media

Diana J. Mason, PhD, RN, FAAN,¹ Barbara Glickstein, MPH, RN,¹ Laura Nixon, MPH,²
Kristi Westphaln, PhD, RN,¹ Sarah Han, BS,² Kimberly Acquaviva, PhD, MSW, CSE¹

Diversity is key to good journalism in a pluralistic society – whether diversity of topics, journalists or sources.ⁱ Women continue to be underrepresented in newsrooms (24 percent) and as expert sources in news stories (36 percent).^{ii,iii} Although women are included as sources in 48 percent of health news stories, the Woodhull Study on Nursing and the Media: Health Care's Invisible Partner, published in 1998, found that nurses were identified as sources in only 4 percent of quotes or other sourcing in health news stories in leading print national and regional newspapers and 1 percent in weeklies and industry publications such as *Modern Healthcare* in September of 1997.^{iv} Nurses were never cited in health news stories on policy and were rarely identified in photos accompanying the articles. Named after Nancy Woodhull, a founding editor of *USA Today*, the study raised awareness that the voices and perspectives of the nation's largest group of health professionals – now 3.5 million, almost 90 percent of whom are women^v – were largely

invisible even when they would have been germane to the story.

Twenty years later, are nurses used as sources more often in health news stories in print media? This research brief presents high-level, preliminary findings from a three-phased study to answer the following questions:

PHASE 1. Are nurses represented as sources and identified in photos in health news stories in public and trade print publications with greater frequency than in 1997?

PHASE 2. What do health journalists perceive to be the barriers and facilitators to using nurses as sources in new stories?

PHASE 3. Are schools of nursing using social media to highlight the expertise of their faculty?

¹: George Washington University, Washington, DC ; ²: Berkeley Media Studies Group, Public Health Institute, Berkeley, CA

ⁱ: Hansen, K.A. (1991). Source diversity and newspaper enterprise journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication*, 28(3), 474-482. Society of Professional Journalism (n.d.). Diversity toolkit. Accessed at <https://www.spj.org/dtb.asp>

ⁱⁱ: Women's Media Center. (2017). *The status of women in the U.S. media 2017*. Accessed at <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/reports/the-status-of-women-in-u.s.-media-2017>

ⁱⁱⁱ: Global Media Monitoring Project. (2015). *United States of America: Global Media Monitoring Project 2015, National Report*. Accessed at http://cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports_2015/national/USA.pdf

^{iv}: Sigma Theta Tau International. (1998). *The Woodhull Study of nursing and the media: Health care's invisible partner*. Indianapolis: STTI.

^v: US Bureau of Census, Current Population Survey (CPS). (2017). Muench, U., Sindelar, J. & Busch, S.H. (2015). Salary difference between male and female registered nurses in the United States. *JAMA*, 313(12), 1265-67.

PHASE 1

Replication of Original Woodhull Study

Methods. This phase sought to replicate the original Woodhull study as closely as possible. We used the Nexis database and Webhose, a web crawling service, to collect health care stories from the same sources that the original study used, excluding those that are no longer in print. Our final sample consisted of 537 articles from seven newspapers, three newsmagazines, and three health care industry publications published in September of 2017. We analyzed each article for topic, type of article, references to health care professionals in the article, valence of those references and gender of the professional referenced. We also conducted a content analysis of images included in the articles.

Findings.

- Nurses were identified as sources in only 2 percent of quotations or other sourcing in health-related articles in September 2017.
- Nurses and the nursing profession were rarely mentioned in stories about health care. Nurses were only mentioned in 13 percent of articles.
- Nurses were most likely to be mentioned in articles about Labor (57 percent), Profession (44 percent), Quality (32 percent) and Education (25 percent). They were less likely to be mentioned in articles about Research (9 percent), Policy (4 percent), the Affordable Care Act (ACA) (4 percent), and Business (3 percent). They were more likely to be mentioned in industry press (14 percent) or newspapers (14 percent) compared to news magazines (6 percent).
- In numerous instances, nurses were absent even though their perspectives were highly relevant to the topic being discussed.
- Nurses were identified in 4 percent of images in the articles.

- Regardless of profession, men were quoted roughly twice as often as women (65 percent and 34 percent, respectively). Men were in 72 percent of images and women in 48 percent.

PHASE 2

Health Journalists' Experiences with Using Nurses as Sources

Methods. This phase examined health journalists' experiences with using nurses as sources in health news stories in various media. Using a snowballing technique to solicit participants, we interviewed 10 health journalists about their experiences with accessing and using nurses as sources in their stories, as well as their perspectives on related barriers and facilitators. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, audio recorded and transcribed for analysis of themes and key points.

Findings. A high-level theme was that biases about women, nurses and positions of power in the health care system can act as barriers to the use of diverse sources in health reporting. Specific themes were:

- Nurses can bring important perspectives to health reporting.
- Journalists don't fully understand the range of nurses' roles, work and education.
- Journalists may value diverse sources, but often don't know how to find nurses to interview and have limited time to track them down.
- Communications staff of health care organizations and universities aren't offering nurses as sources unless journalists ask for them.
- Editorial biases, policies and processes can get in the way of using nurses as sources.
- Nurses and their associations aren't strategic about engaging journalists.

PHASE 3 Use of Twitter by Schools of Nursing

Methods. This phase examined how schools of nursing use Twitter to position nursing faculty and researchers as experts. The most recent 3,200 tweets from the public Twitter accounts of each of 47 of the top 50 schools of nursing^{vi} from September 29, 2016 through February 22, 2018 were extracted and analyzed using dominant hashtags and were coded as either inward-facing (intended to invite attention from/interaction with nurses, members of the university/school community, or attendees at a nursing conference or Twitter chat) or outward-facing (intended to invite attention from/interaction with people outside of the nursing and university/school). The follower lists of all 47 schools were also extracted and analyzed.

Findings.

- Among the 11,143 tweets containing at least one hashtag, 79.83 percent were inward-facing. Nursing-specific hashtags were present in 35.37 percent of tweets. School-specific hashtags were present in 36.77 percent of tweets.
- Only 1.15 percent (n=668) of the 58,184 unduplicated user accounts following the 47 schools of nursing belonged to members of the media.
- Although 47 of the top 50 schools of nursing have an active social media presence on Twitter, collectively their use of hashtags functions more like an intranet to communicate with other nurses rather than as a tool to invite attention from and dialogue with members of the media.



Diana J. Mason, PhD, RN, FAAN, principal investigator and senior senior policy professor at the George Washington University School of Nursing.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite gradual increases in women's representation in the media, nurses remain largely invisible in health news stories, despite their relevance to almost any health issue. Although the profession has an increasing number of nurses with doctoral degrees who are clinicians or researchers with deep clinical and policy expertise,^{vii} nurses are seldom included as sources in stories on topics related to health policy, the business of health care and research.

There are a number of reasons for this underrepresentation. Nursing remains a predominately female profession, so the underrepresentation of women in general is undoubtedly a factor. Journalists are unsure of all that nurses do and that they can contribute to stories other than those on health care labor or nursing, specifically. Journalists are also unsure of how to find nurses with relevant expertise for a story. When they do use nurses as sources, they may have to justify this decision to their editor. Physicians remain the go-to experts for journalists on all aspects of health and health care, despite differences between medicine and nursing in their experiences, philosophies, and scope and focus of practice. The communications staff of universities and health care organizations may be similarly unfamiliar with nurses' expertise, as they rarely offer nurses as sources for journalists.

^{vi}. Drawn from U.S. News and World Report's 2017 list of the top nursing schools with master's degree programs; 47 of the top 50 had active public Twitter accounts.

^{vii}. Campaign for Action. (July 13, 2017). Number of people receiving nursing doctoral degrees annually. Accessed at <https://campaignforaction.org/resource/number-people-receiving-nursing-doctoral-degrees-annually/>

NURSES AS SOURCES IN HEALTH NEWS*



* Difference between 1997 and 2017 is not statistically significant.

NURSES RARELY MENTIONED IN HEALTHCARE NEWS STORIES



 13%
nurses
mentioned
in articles

Nurses also share in the responsibility for their poor representation in the media. Nurses need to be more responsive to journalists' requests for interviews and better prepared for media opportunities. This is not something that most nurses learn in school or through professional training. Schools of nursing can play a role in showcasing nurses' expertise through a more outward-facing use of social media, especially on platforms such as Twitter used by many journalists to track issues and experts. If this happens, journalists may be more interested in following them. In addition, schools and nursing associations need to be more proactive in putting their members' expertise in front of journalists, including for stories on health policy and the business of health care.

The percentage of nurses in health news stories analyzed for this study is likely higher in reality than reflected in the study because nurses are not often identified as such. Many newspapers and newsmagazines have style guides that will refer to a physician as an MD or Dr., ensuring that the reader knows that the source is a physician, regardless of whether the source is cited because of expertise in policy, health care administration or some other position that does not require a medical degree. These style guides often prohibit the use of RN and will not ensure that readers know a source is a

registered nurse or has a doctoral degree. As a result, a nurse may be identified by a clinical title that may not indicate that he or she is a nurse.

Phase 1 of the study sought to replicate the original Woodhull study of 1998, so it only examined the same print media used in the original study. This included the news outlets' online presence, but much has changed in the media landscape in the last 20 years, including the emergence of news outlets that publish only online. A follow-up study that examines stories in these newer outlets would clarify whether online media does a better job of including nurses as sources. However, Phase 2 findings suggest that online journalists likely face the same barriers to using nurses as sources.

Good journalism depends upon access to sources with varied perspectives and experiences who will work with media to elucidate the important issues of the day. Health journalists may be missing the best part of a story if they are not talking with nurses, and nurses may be shirking their social responsibility to advocate for the health of people if they are not proactive in accessing and responding to journalists.

Funding for this study was provided by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Beatrice Renfield Foundation, Sigma Theta Tau International, American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, Donald and Barbara Jonas Foundation, National League for Nursing, Wolters Kluwer Health, On Course Learning, American Association of Colleges of Nursing and American Organization of Nurse Executives.

The Center for Health Policy and Media Engagement at the George Washington University School of Nursing advances policy and the health of the public, through education, research, media and public forums.

**For more information, visit
go.gwu.edu/woodhull.**