Engaging Ethnic Media to Expand the Reach and Effectiveness of Communication Strategies to Reduce Health Disparities

Elisia L. Cohen  
Department of Communication  
University of Kentucky

Charlene A. Caburnay  
George Warren Brown School of Social Work  
Washington University – St. Louis

María E. Len-Ríos  
Health Communication Research Center  
Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia

Timothy J. Poor  
George Warren Brown School of Social Work  
Washington University – St. Louis

Glen T. Cameron  
Health Communication Research Center  
Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia

Douglas A. Luke  
George Warren Brown School of Social Work  
Washington University – St. Louis

Barbara Powe  
American Cancer Society  
Atlanta, Georgia

Jon Stemmle  
Health Communication Research Center  
Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia

Matthew W. Kreuter  
George Warren Brown School of Social Work  
Washington University – St. Louis
In December 2005, our National Cancer Institute (NCI)-funded Center for Excellence in Cancer Communication Research (CECCR) launched the Ozioma News Service. It is a national service with three distinguishing features: (1) an exclusive focus on cancer news; (2) distribution to Black newspapers only; and (3) news releases that are customized for each community to which they are sent. Customization is its signature characteristic—incorporating community and race-specific data to cancer news and feature stories to maximize their appeal and relevance to Black newspaper reporters, editors, and readers. From December 2005 through September 2007, we developed 444 Ozioma news releases—37 different releases, each adapted for 12 different intervention communities—and delivered them to local Black newspapers.

The result: Cancer coverage increased in Black newspapers receiving Ozioma news releases compared to Black newspapers in control communities.

Each of the 37 Ozioma news releases was adopted by at least one newspaper. Eleven of the 12 intervention newspapers published at least one release (a potential readership of 317,000) and the average number of stories adopted per newspaper was 8.4 (range: 0–26). We content-analyzed Black newspapers before and during the intervention period and found that the proportion of health stories that were about cancer was significantly higher for the newspapers receiving Ozioma releases ($p = 0.025$), and these newspapers were more likely to have at least one cancer story per newspaper issue ($p = 0.044$) compared to the control group. The overall news hole for health-related coverage did not increase, but the proportion of this coverage devoted to cancer did. Newspapers adopting the most Ozioma news releases showed the greatest increase in cancer coverage from pre- and postintervention.

**CURRENT RESEARCH**

The success of Ozioma in expanding the reach and improving the effectiveness of health communication strategies reinforces the evidence that press releases can be a cost-effective way to expose large numbers of people to public health information. Black newspapers are an important tool for health and cancer education. In our 2005 national survey of 783 Black newspaper readers, 71% said they read the health stories and that Black newspapers were their top source for health or medical information. Our analysis also indicates that the more connected readers are to Black newspapers (based on strength of self-identity and other news reading patterns), the more they rely upon and trust Black newspapers for health and cancer information.

While it is clear that the Ozioma News Service can help enrich the health information environment in communities served by Black newspapers, the question remains, will it have measurable effects on Black newspaper readers? Annual surveys (baseline and two follow-ups) conducted with a panel of Black newspaper readers from the same 24 communities are being evaluated. The surveys assessed readers’ use and perceptions of Black papers, as well as their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to cancer.

In a newly launched follow-up study, we are testing the effects of an enhanced Ozioma that features highly localized information, quotes, and photographs supplied by lay journalists in conjunction with the American Cancer Society in each community. We are also developing an automated, Web-based version of Ozioma for journalists and media relations professionals. This OziomaOnline system, to be completed by 2011, will help identify and insert locally relevant, race-specific data and statistics, community resources, graphics, and photographs directly into cancer-related stories and releases developed by any reporter or organization.

**FUTURE IMPACT**

In the years ahead, the Ozioma News Service will be expanded to provide locally relevant, race- and ethnicity-specific cancer news stories for other population subgroups and for other media, including radio, television, and the Internet. African Americans, Hispanics, and other racial and ethnic groups often shoulder a disproportionate burden of many health problems, but are often missed by traditional channels of distributing public health information. African Americans, Hispanics, and other ethnic minorities have strong connections to media that target their ethnic group or community. These targeted community or niche newspapers are growing in number and can always benefit from additional health information resources that are appropriately translated, non-technical, and culturally connected to the local audience.

Specifically, with community-based, resource-modest newspapers on the rise, and general audience newspapers cutting staff, there may be a growing demand for compelling, evidence-based, and culturally and locally relevant health news. The Ozioma News Service, along with its Web-based localization tool, OziomaOnline, is uniquely poised to provide locally relevant, race-specific, and evidence-based cancer news stories to the mainstream and ethnic press and other special population media. For example, if the Ozioma News Service was disseminated and institutionalized, it could potentially reach all 200 Black newspapers in the U.S. and their 15 million readers.

High-quality, locally relevant news content is desirable across all news channels—novel, in-depth, reliable, customized news that readers can use to talk about with others. Beyond community-based newspapers, the Ozioma approach can meet the needs of news editors across new and traditional media landscapes seeking new ways to deliver valuable and interesting health stories that attract news readers and viewers with a variety of media choices.
More broadly, future systems like the Ozioma News Service and OziomaOnline will expand the reach and effectiveness of existing health information infrastructure to identify and disseminate health information with increasing levels of local and population specificity in the data-driven environment of Internet 2.0. Systems like Ozioma make it possible to quickly harness and process locally relevant and race-specific cancer data to maximize their usability and social impact for many U.S. populations.

Eliminating cancer and other health disparities among racial and ethnic groups will require novel, persistent approaches to arm communities with the information needed to prevent disease or to detect disease at an early stage. Equipping alternative communication channels with newsworthy stories can help provide communities and their residents with this critical information.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by a grant from the National Cancer Institute Centers of Excellence in Cancer Communication Research program (CA-P50-95815). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Cancer Institute or the National Institutes of Health.