

Obesity in British and German online newspapers

How news articles discuss events and issues may impact how these events and issues are understood by people and what courses of action receive more support. Much has therefore been written about the news representation of obesity - excessive fat accumulation that may impair health, but most studies have analysed its portrayal in newspapers from the United States (US) and Canada.

This focus could be explained with the high prevalence of obesity in the US and Canada and the recognition of obesity as a chronic disease in its own right in both countries. In contrast, in other parts of the world obesity is treated as a contributor to chronic diseases including some types of cancer and type 2 diabetes.

In Europe, where Britain and Germany are often said to top obesity prevalence rankings, similar efforts to recognise obesity as a chronic disease have been made - starting with a 2009 proposal to hold a European Obesity Day and culminating, in 2011, in calls from the event's president to declare obesity a chronic disease.

In our article for *Health* we explored how obesity was discussed in British and German online newspapers between 2009 and 2011 and found that (1) obesity was mainly presented as a matter of self-control and obese individuals were more intensely constructed as irresponsible than previously reported, but (2) such views were challenged with messages of body acceptance and coming out.

Our finding that news coverage was dominated by messages that obese individuals should make physical activity and food consumption changes to achieve weight loss confirms what many previous studies have concluded - that in the media obesity is depicted in individualised terms.

Such depictions have a number of implications. They provide little impetus for governments to tackle wider contributors beyond individual behaviour, for example, the advertising, availability and affordability of certain foods. They may also sustain weigh-based discrimination. Frequent exposure to news articles emphasising lack of self-control as a leading cause of weight gain may make it more acceptable for people to ridicule obese individuals.

Our findings also diverge from previous studies in some respects.

If previous studies had reported that obese individuals were portrayed as irresponsible in relation to their own health, in the news articles that we analysed they were also constructed as endangering the health and safety of others - notably, of fellow passengers who were said to have suffered anything from mild cramps to serious haematomas; and of the whole planet - by leaving larger carbon footprints compared to leaner individuals.

In parallel with messages that obesity is a weight problem to be solved by exercising self-control over food consumption and physical activity, we also found news articles that focused on the negative impact not of weight on physical health, but of weight-based discrimination on the psychological wellbeing of individuals labelled as obese. These news articles called for acceptance of weight diversity in general and of one's own body regardless of weight, showed examples of some individuals who are fat but healthy and gave other individuals a platform to come out about enjoying weight gain.

Overall, our findings show that media outlets can function not only as possible contributors to weight-based discrimination, but also as platforms for countering deeply rooted understandings of obesity as a weight problem to be solved with greater self-control.

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