

# Let's Talk: Health Equity in Media and Communications

## Webinar Summary and Call to Action



### Webinar Focus

The Partners for Advancing Health Equity Collaborative hosted the webinar, *Let's Talk: Health Equity in Media and Communications* on July 19, 2022.

Panelists discussed the impact media and communications have on health equity. The discussion highlighted practices on how to effectively engage audiences around health equity topics, reframe the way we talk about health equity, and build community. This report provides a synthesis of key takeaways, solutions, and action steps identified from the webinar.

### Webinar Voices

- › **Bob Ortega**, Fellow, [Center for Health Journalism](#), Senior Writer, [CNN](#)
- › **Duane Reynolds**, President, [Chartis Health Collective](#)
- › **Nicholas St. Fleur**, General Assignment Reporter and Associate Editorial Director or Events, [STAT](#)
- › **Lillie D. Williamson**, Assistant Professor, [Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison](#)
- › **Caryn Bell**, PhD, Associate Director P4HE, [Tulane School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine](#)

### Key Resources

- [Using Media to Impact Policy](#)
- [Social Media for Policy Change](#)
- [Addressing Misinformation](#)

### Your Voice

P4HE values collaboration. If there is a resource on this topic that you would like to share with us, provide it [here](#).

### Key Takeaways

The way society communicates about health inequities impacts the ability to achieve health equity. It is critical that we understand what the term health equity means and be cognizant in how we communicate about health equity in all platforms, particularly those as broad reaching as media. The messages we receive from news, print, social, and other forms of media impact how we communicate and understand health and health related topics within our own families and communities. This webinar brought together journalists, podcasters, and researchers with expertise communicating about health equity. Panelists exchanged ideas and practices that can be employed to better communicate health equity issues and inspire action within communities.

### Call To Action



*"Health equity is not just about Black people, not just about Latino people, not just about the LGBTQ+ community, it is about all of us... at any juncture health equity can be an issue that affects populations differently. To solve the issue, we all have to be a part of the conversation."* Duane Reynolds, President, Chartis Health Collective

Below we've summarized immediate steps to effectively leverage media to address health equity.

## Solutions for Health Equity in Media



**> Be human centered and amplify the stories of individuals who have lived experience with inequities.**

Communicating the human experience is vital to changing the way the public thinks of health equity and how health institutions interact with marginalized populations. The humanistic aspect of health care can be reflected through stories that personalize science and data, which allows the public to empathize with health disparities and inequities. Personal narratives provide real examples of structural issues and injustices in health organizations and systems. Linking personal narratives with data and research is one avenue to address health equity in the media. Experts caution that authors should take care to contextualize individual stories so that messages are salient for a wide audience.



*"... It is really about using narratives and stories to humanize issues and linking those to the structures... if we only use the stories, then you run the risk of it being... episodic. [For example, people may respond with,] 'it is a single episode, it is just something that happened to this individual.' Those sorts of things can... make group cues and stereotypes salient."* Lillie D. Williamson, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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### › Discuss how media and social media impact the public's understanding of health equity.

The way health equity is portrayed through various types of media affects the general public's understanding of health equity concepts. Misinformation, disinformation, and conflicting messages may impact the audience's ability to fully understand the gravity of health inequities. This includes learning about popular non-news mediums for reaching audiences and starting discussions around health equity topics such as fiction series, podcasts, and social media.



*"The work is to reach out beyond our immediate usual audience and to communicate with people in communities who may not normally be reading, watching, or listening to our news outlets. Try to figure out how to engage them in our work and encourage and cause change."*

Bob Ortega, Fellow, Center for Health Journalism and Senior Writer, CNN

Media can expand the public's understanding of health inequities through the use of dynamic education. Panelist Nick Fleur combined dynamic education and a human centric approaches by covering [colorectal cancer screening procedure first-hand](#) after releasing an emotional story about a family member's experience caring for someone with colorectal cancer.

### › Examine how health equity is discussed in news coverage.

Examining the use of appropriate terminology when discussing health inequities in media is critical for effective messaging. Using the terms disparities, inequalities, and inequities interchangeably can have significant impacts on the way messaging is perceived and acted upon.



*"We have to be careful about the language that we are using in these spaces, because language has implications for how we are thinking and how we influence how others are thinking. ...[Inequity] has a very specific meaning. It means that there are not just differences, and they are not only avoidable, but they are also unjust, which signals that there are other things that we should be doing and thinking about, particularly in the ways in which inequity sits within our structures."* Lillie D. Williamson, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison

### › Explore next steps in using media to garner positive support for policy change.

Media plays a role in policy change by framing issues and growing public interest and support. Mass media coverage can impact national policy agendas by focusing on key issues.<sup>1</sup> Journalists and

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<sup>1</sup> [Mass Media and the Policy Process | Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics](#)

communications professionals should engage in partnerships with local community organizations to foster trust among groups experiencing health injustices. One way to rebuild trust is through sharing fact-based information via credible, trusted, sources.

## Barriers to Health Equity in Media



## State of the Science



*"The results of [research] might make you ask, 'what do people really think about health inequities', and 'do I have health equity?' [Research] also makes you think about how we as a society communicate about health inequities and what underlying beliefs, people have about health equity."* Caryn Bell, PhD, Associate Director P4HE, Tulane School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine

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### Media impact on health policy.

Research on the impacts of media on health policy making is limited, especially regarding social media. More research in this area would help illuminate avenues for using media to garner support for policy change. Those working in media could reevaluate the impact of their role and incorporate an activism paradigm to facilitate positive change when reporting health equity issues.

### Linking data and personal narratives.

Individual stories must be contextualized using broader research and data on health equity that gets linked to action in health care systems and communities. These evidence-built systems must work towards regaining people's medical trust. Stories from those who have shared lived experiences must be at the forefront of the work to progress health equity. The human element dispels stereotypes and mitigates the tendency for people to ignore issues that they feel do not affect them. When people speak the truth about the historical dysfunctions in health care, everyone can accurately learn and effectively engage in the conversation to develop solutions. Reframing how people view health equity depends on humanization of data and [broader education on health research](#). Building trust among communities and health institutions will require acknowledging the truth of the past and transparently informing the public about current issues.

### Historical research and medical mistrust.

[Distrust](#) of the medical establishment is the result of structural racism, marginalization, and mistreatment. Structural racism, sexism, and transphobia have damaged the reputation of health care institutions and have impacted the personal health care choices of Black people, women, and transgender individuals. Past research practices have contributed to the current state of distrust in health institutions and health research within communities, most notably with the [Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#). This continued mistrust has resulted in [vaccine hesitancy](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic and a [lack of diverse participation](#) in current medical research, which furthers health equity concerns in historically marginalized communities.



*"We need to have a medical system that earns people's trust. That is where we need to focus our efforts, to create this system. [Part of earning that trust] has to do with reckoning our past, acknowledging it, and taking the proper steps to address those past misgivings and misdeeds."* Nicholas St. Fleur, General Assignment Reporter and Associate Editorial Director of Events, STAT

## Next Steps for Leveraging Media to Progress Health Equity

### Link the Human Element to Research & Data

Reframing the way we approach and share health equity information through the media will require linking genuine human narratives to research of health institutions. Humanizing health equity allows everyone to understand the its importance and the connectedness of community.



### Report on Solutions for Health Equity Issues

Journalists and other media professionals should go beyond just reporting on health issues but also investigating solutions for how to mitigate health disparities.

### Be Transparent in Storytelling

Media and communication professionals must be transparent when seeking out stories or personal narratives from individuals and ensure that they understand the ramifications of sharing them to the public. This helps build trust with the media.

## About P4HE

The P4HE Collaborative harmonizes goals, advances learning, and facilitates collaboration to improve health equity. It is led by the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and is part of the Tulane Institute for Innovations in Health Equity. Support for this program is provided by ICF. Funding is provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.



### Foster

the co-creation and spread of knowledge.



### Sharpen

our research tools to focus on solutions; facts and stories.



### Disrupt

traditional research approaches.



### Harmonize

our voices.



### Challenge

the status quo.



### Shine

light on practices that are indefensible, irrational and inconsistent.