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Nutrition in the media: A cross-sectional analysis of health and nutrition articles reported in five popular UK newspapers

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Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of death in the UK accounting for 89 % of total deaths in the UK⁽¹⁾. Obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease (CVD) and respiratory disease are known as the major four chronic diseases, which account for the most cases of mortality and morbidity in the UK⁽²⁾. Therefore promoting public health is a vital role for the Government. News media is the primary source for health related information to the public⁽³⁾, providing information through the Internet, smartphones, radio stations and printed newspapers⁽⁴⁾. Despite the decline in circulation of newspapers including ‘tabloids’ and ‘broadsheets’, it remains the most efficient source to provide the public with essential information⁽⁵⁾, however nutrition information is not always accurate and fully informative.

This study analyses articles from five of the most popular newspapers in the UK collected over 6 weeks from the 30th of June to the 9th of August 2014. Descriptive analysis was carried out and all articles which reported health and nutrition topics were graded using a validated quality assessment tool⁽⁶⁾. Four tabloids and one broadsheet was used to analyse articles.

143 articles were identified and assessed providing a total of 3-4 articles on average related to health and nutrition being published each day across all 5 papers. Data was checked in duplicate. Table 1 shows a summary of the mean article score for each newspaper. Results showed that *The Daily Express* and the *Daily Telegraph* published articles of a higher quality. Articles in *The Sun* had the lowest scores and therefore published poor quality articles. Articles that provided more scientific background, were written by a named journalist, often with health experience and were larger in length resulted in statistically higher scores.

Table 1. Summary of the descriptive analysis, by newspaper.

Newspaper	Number of published articles	Size			Author listed (%)	Quality Assessment Instrument score		
		Small (%)	Medium (%)	Large (%)		Mean	SD	CI (95%)
The Sun	20	80	10	10	40	-1.25	3.62	-2.95-0.45
Daily Mirror	23	48	4	48	76	1.60	3.03	-0.13-3.35
Daily Mail	43	65	19	16	67	1.65	4.21	0.35-2.95
Daily Express	29	48	24	28	79	3.96	3.98	2.45-5.48
The Daily Telegraph	28	79	18	4	71	2.78	4.29	1.12-4.45
Total	143	64	16	20	68	1.93	4.32	1.22-2.68

SD - Standard Deviation CI - Confidence Interval

These results indicate that the quality of nutrition and health articles varies substantially. To improve the quality of articles more training is needed for journalists to ensure that they understand the scientific study and provide sufficient information but is still appropriate.

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