



Short Communication

Stigmatizing language in news media coverage of the opioid epidemic: Implications for public health



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ABSTRACT

Public stigma toward people who use illicit drugs impedes advancement of public health solutions to the opioid epidemic and reduces willingness to seek addiction treatment. Experimental studies show that use of certain terms, such as “addict” and “substance abuser,” exacerbate stigma while alternative terms, such as “person with a substance use disorder,” are less stigmatizing. We examine the frequency with which stigmatizing terms and less-stigmatizing alternatives are used in U.S. news media coverage of the opioid epidemic.

We analyzed 6399 news stories about the opioid epidemic published/aired by high-circulation and high-viewership U.S. national and regional print and television news outlets from July 2008 through June 2018. We calculated the proportion of news stories mentioning terms shown to be stigmatizing, as well as terms shown to be less-stigmatizing alternatives, in randomized experiments. Data was collected during May through August 2018 and analyzed in September 2018. Over the 10-year study period, 49% of news stories about the opioid epidemic mentioned any stigmatizing term and 2% mentioned any less-stigmatizing alternative. The proportion of news stories mentioning stigmatizing terms over the 10-year study period increased from 37% in July 2008–June 2009 to 45% in July 2017–June 2018. The language included in U.S. news media coverage of the opioid epidemic may contribute to and reinforce widespread public stigma toward people with opioid use disorders. This stigma may be a barrier to implementation of evidence-based interventions to prevent opioid overdose deaths. Establishing journalistic standards to de-stigmatize the language of addiction is a public health priority.

1. Introduction

High rates of public stigma toward people who use drugs has been identified as an impediment to implementation of public health initiatives to address the U.S. opioid epidemic (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), which is projected to have caused nearly 50,000 overdose deaths in 2017 (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018). In a 2017 national survey, only 27% of Americans reported viewing a person using opioids as deserving, as opposed to worthless (McGinty et al., 2018). Stigmatizing attitudes are correlated with lower support for evidence-based public health policies such as expanding access to pharmacological treatment and establishing safe consumption sites (McGinty et al., 2018; Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2017), and higher support for punitive policies, such as prosecuting people who obtain multiple opioid prescriptions from different doctors (Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2017). These findings are consistent with

Schneider and Ingram's framework on the social construction of target populations which posits that the public is unlikely to support policies to benefit – instead preferring to punish – highly stigmatized groups (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).

Americans get much of their information about public health from the news media (Brodie et al., 2003), making news media coverage of the opioid epidemic a powerful medium for the transmission of stigma-inducing or -reducing messages. A large body of literature on news media framing demonstrates that small changes in wording can influence how messages are interpreted by audiences (Chong and Druckman, 2007). In the context of the opioid epidemic, recent experimental studies have shown that the terms “addict,” “substance abuser,” and “opioid addict” elicit greater stigmatizing attitudes than the alternative terms “substance use disorder,” “person with a substance use disorder” and “person with an opioid use disorder” (Ashford et al., 2018; Kelly and Westerhoff, 2010; Goodyear et al., 2018). Stigmatizing

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terms dehumanize people with addiction by labeling them with their illness, whereas less-stigmatizing alternatives are person-centered (e.g. “addict” versus “person with an opioid use disorder”). The stigmatizing term *abuser* likely reinforces the widely-held notion in the U.S. that addiction is the result of poor individual choices (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

The objective of this study was to examine the frequency with which stigmatizing terms about opioid addiction and alternative terms shown to be less-stigmatizing in randomized experiments were used in U.S. news media coverage of the opioid epidemic from 2008 to 2018.

2. Methods

2.1. Inclusion criteria

News sources included three high-circulation national newspapers (USA Today, Washington Post, New York Times); two high-circulation newspapers within each U.S. census region (New York Post, Philadelphia Enquirer, Atlanta Journal Constitution, Tampa Bay Times, Chicago Daily Herald, Minneapolis Star Tribune, San Diego Union Tribune and Spokesman Review); and ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, CNN, and Fox news programs. From these sources, we included all news stories published/aired from July 1, 2008 through June 30, 2018 with at least three mentions of any combination of the terms: “opioid;” “opiate;” “heroin;” “fentanyl;” “prescription painkiller;” or “prescription pain medication.” So, for example, a news story that mentioned term “opioid” twice and term “heroin” once would be included; a news story that mentioned the term “opioid” once and did not mention any other terms of interest would be excluded. This approach was designed to exclude news stories with only a passing mention of opioid-related issues.

2.2. Search Strategy

We identified news stories meeting the inclusion criterion using a search of the LexisNexis database. We then searched included stories, again using the LexisNexis search engine, for the stigmatizing and alternative terms of interest. Stigmatizing terms included “addict” and variations of “substance abuser” (e.g. “drug abuser”) and “substance abuse” (e.g. “drug abuse”). Alternative, less-stigmatizing terms included variations of “substance use disorder” (e.g. “opioid use disorder”) and “person with a substance use disorder” (e.g. “individual with an opioid use disorder”). See Exhibit 1 footnotes for complete lists of terms.

We also explored the frequency of use of two additional terms that experts have suggested may increase audiences’ stigmatizing attitudes toward people who use drugs but for which no randomized experiments have been conducted to establish that these terms are in fact stigmatizing: “junkie” and “clean” (Kelly et al., 2016). The term “clean,” used to describe people who have stopped using drugs, may elevate stigma by implying that people actively using drugs are dirty. We examined the proportion of news stories mentioning stigmatizing (both including and excluding the terms junkie and clean) and alternative terms over the 10-year study period. Data was collected during May through August 2018 and analyzed in September 2018.

3. Results

Across the 10-year study period, news stories about the opioid epidemic were far more likely to include stigmatizing terms than less-stigmatizing alternatives (Fig. 1). Our analytic sample included 6399 print and television news stories about the opioid epidemic published or aired between July 1, 2008 and June 30, 2018. Of these, 49% (N = 3106) mentioned one or more terms shown to be stigmatizing in randomized experiments and 2% (N = 157) mentioned one or more alternative, less-stigmatizing terms.

The proportion of news stories mentioning any stigmatizing term remained relatively constant over the 10-year study period, with an overall increase from 37% in July 2008–June 2009 to 45% in July 2017–June 2018 and a peak of 59% during July 2013–June 2014 (Fig. 1, Panel A). The proportion of news stories mentioning either “substance/drug/etc. use disorder” or “person/individual/etc. with a substance/drug/etc. use disorder” increased from 0% in July 2008–June 2009 to 4% in June 2017–July 2018 (Exhibit 1, Panel B). “Addict” was the most frequently mentioned stigmatizing term over the course of the study period; see Appendix A for the number of news stories mentioning specific terms by year.

The potentially stigmatizing terms “junkie” and “clean” were mentioned in 3% (N = 183) and 14% (N = 865) of news stories. If those terms are included, the proportions all news stories including at least one stigmatizing or potentially stigmatizing term over the time period increases to 53%. Forty-six percent of print news stories, 61% of opinion editorials, and 54% of television news transcripts mentioned any stigmatizing terms (Appendix B). Trends in the use of stigmatizing and less stigmatizing terms over time by individual news outlet are shown in Appendix C. Patterns varied somewhat by news outlet but were generally consistent with overall trends showing no change or an increase in the use of stigmatizing terms over time and a small increase in the use of less-stigmatizing terms from 2008 to 2018.

4. Discussion

Findings suggest that the language included in U.S. news media coverage of the opioid epidemic may contribute to and reinforce the widespread public stigma toward people with opioid use disorders. Such stigma may hamper advancement of an evidence-based public health agenda to address the opioid epidemic. In addition to being correlated with lower support for public health policies (McGinty et al., 2018; Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2017), public stigma can discourage individuals affected by opioid addiction from seeking help due to fear of disclosure and rejection by their family and community (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

The 2017 Associated Press Stylebook included guidelines on avoiding the stigmatizing language of addiction, including explicit recommendations to avoid “addict” and “abuser” (Associated Press, 2017), but our results suggest that such guidelines have had little effect on the terminology used in news coverage of the opioid epidemic. This finding suggests a need for training for journalists, editors, and producers, though research on best practices for speeding adoption of terminology changes is lacking. Concision and clarity are likely challenges; stigmatizing terms, such as “addict,” are concise and easily understood by audiences, whereas non-stigmatizing alternatives like “person with a substance use disorder” are longer and may be viewed by audiences (and journalists and editors) as less-interpretable medical jargon. The stigmatizing language of addiction has been ingrained in our lexicon; while now known to exacerbate stigma, prior to 2013 “substance abuse” was an accepted clinical term. Changing journalistic standards around the language of addiction needs to be paired with institutional efforts to eliminate this problematic terminology from academic journals, research institutes, and even federal agencies: the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). Given the degree to which they have been engrained in our societal lexicon, the stigmatizing terms “addict” and “abuse” may be more challenging to banish than less-used terms like “junkie.”

Our findings suggest that strategies beyond language recommendations like those made by the Associated Press Stylebook are needed to help journalists and their readers humanize people with opioid and other substance use disorders. Contact with individuals experiencing stigmatized conditions like opioid use disorder can decrease stigma and increase empathy (Livingston et al., 2012). Contact-based trainings or other strategies in which journalists and news editors/

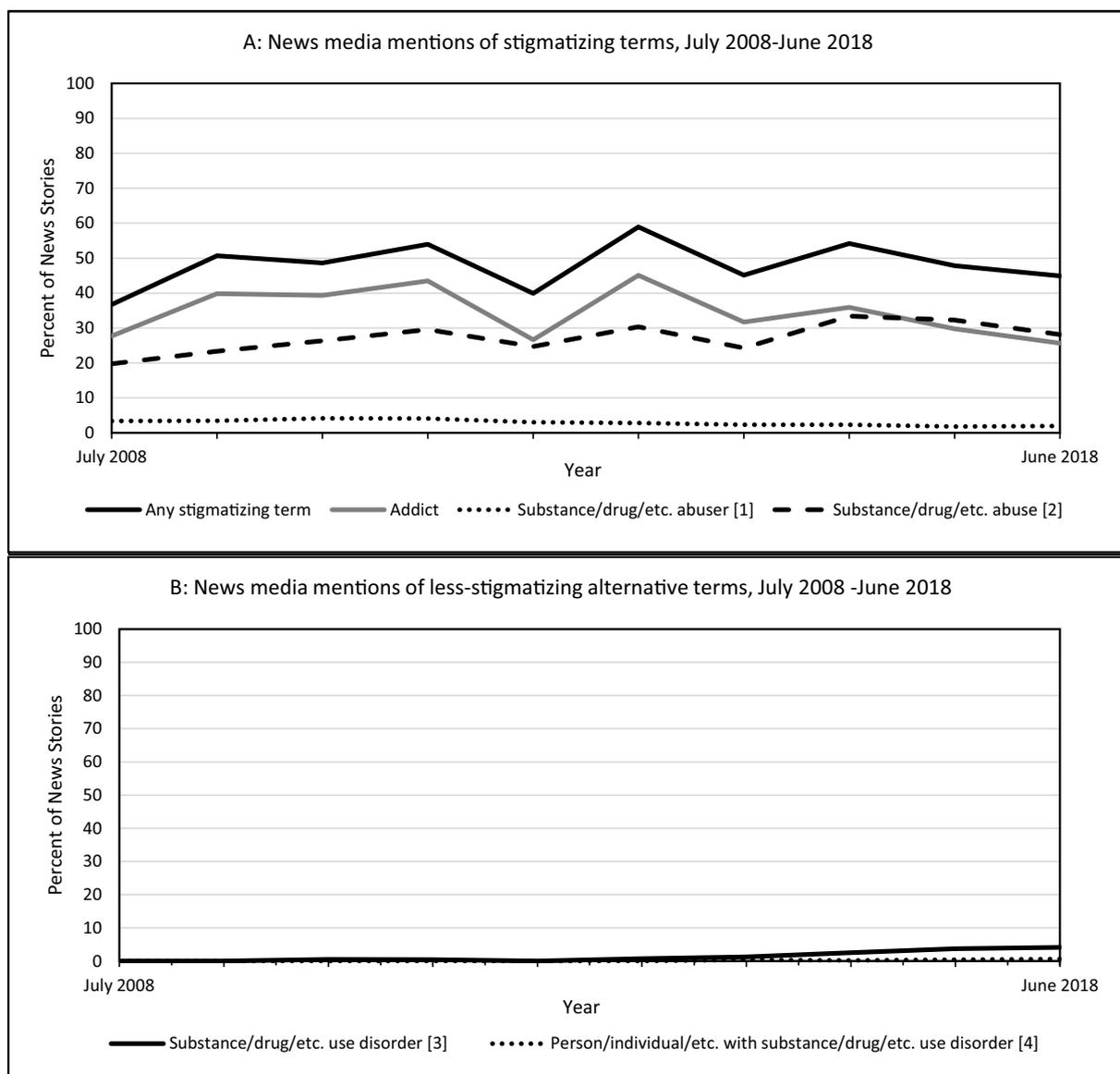


Fig. 1. Trends in news media mentions of stigmatizing and less-stigmatizing alternative terms in news media coverage of the opioid epidemic, 2008–2018 (N = 6399 news stories)

Note: a single news story could include multiple terms of interest or no terms of interest. Thus, totals do not add up to 100%

[1] Terms in this category included substance/drug/opioid/opiate/heroin/fentanyl abuser

[2] Terms in this category included substance/drug/opioid/opiate/heroin/fentanyl abuse

[3] Terms in this category includes substance/drug/opioid/opiate/heroin/fentanyl use disorder

[4] Terms in this category included all possible combinations of person/individual/individuals/people with substance/drug/opioid/opiate/heroin/fentanyl use disorder(s) or with a substance/a drug/an opioid/an opiate/a heroin/a fentanyl use disorder.

producers have the opportunity to meaningfully interact with people with first-hand experience of opioid addiction may help to motivate production of humanizing coverage, including but not limited to avoidance of stigmatizing terms. Communication research shows that sympathetic narratives, or in-depth stories about individuals that include contextual details, can prompt positive emotions among audiences (Murphy et al., 2013). In the opioid context specifically, narratives depicting an individual's path from opioid addiction to successful treatment and recovery have been shown to reduce audience's stigmatizing attitudes toward people with opioid use disorder (McGinty et al., 2015).

Local television news programs and internet-only news sources were not included in our sample. Our analysis did not allow us to explain trends in the use of stigmatizing and alternative terms over time. Importantly, we focused on characterizing usage of terms shown to be

stigmatizing/less-stigmatizing in randomized experiments, as well as two additional terms – “junkie” and “clean” – hypothesized to be stigmatizing. Future experimental research may identify other stigmatizing terms and/or less stigmatizing alternatives. Our use of an automated search process to identify stigmatizing terms rather than a hand-review of new stories precluded us from examining whether the use of stigmatizing terms differed by news story topic (e.g., stories about treatment versus criminal justice issues) or other important dimensions, such as whether the news story depicted an individual with opioid addiction in a positive light. Future studies on this topic should consider the context surrounding these stigmatizing terms, including dimensions such as whether such terms are used in quotes from sources versus in the news story content produced by the journalist and whether or not these terms are paired with other communication strategies, such as the sympathetic narratives described above, shown to reduce audiences'

stigmatizing attitudes. Use of sentiment analysis (Taboada et al., 2011), a machine learning approach, could be used to help explore the attitudes and emotions that may be prompted by use of the terms examined in this study.

5. Conclusion

Language in news stories about the opioid epidemic likely contributes to the widespread public stigma toward people with addiction that hinders advancement of public health policy solutions to the U.S.

opioid epidemic. Changing journalistic standards around the language of addiction is a public health priority.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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Appendix A. Number and percent news stories mentioning specific stigmatizing and alternative terms, by year

	7/2008–6/2009		7/2009–6/2010		7/2010–6/2011		7/2011–6/2012		7/2012–6/2013		7/2013–6/2014	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
All articles with at least 3 mentions	177		231		216		267		263		672	
Stigmatizing terms												
Any stigmatizing term	78	44.1	129	55.8	114	52.8	154	57.7	114	43.3	414	61.6
Any stigmatizing term (excl. junkie & clean)	65	36.7	117	50.6	105	48.6	144	53.9	105	39.9	396	58.9
Addict	49	27.7	92	39.8	85	39.4	116	43.4	70	26.6	303	45.1
Substance/drug/opioid/etc. abuser	6	3.4	8	3.5	9	4.2	11	4.1	8	3.0	19	2.8
Substance/drug/opioid/etc. abuse	35	19.8	54	23.4	57	26.4	79	29.6	65	24.7	204	30.4
Clean	22	12.4	45	19.5	39	18.1	50	18.7	32	12.2	129	19.2
Junkie	11	6.2	19	8.2	14	6.5	9	3.4	5	1.9	30	4.5
Less stigmatizing terms												
Any less stigmatizing term	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.5	1	0.4	0	0.0	5	0.7
Substance/opioid/etc. use disorder	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.5	1	0.4	0	0.0	5	0.7
Person/individual/etc. with substance/opioid/etc. use disorder	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	7/2014–6/2015		7/2015–6/2016		7/2016–6/2017		7/2017–6/2018		Total			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
All articles with at least 3 mentions	647		916		1163		1847		6399			
Stigmatizing terms												
Any stigmatizing term	312	48.2	528	57.6	635	54.6	918	49.7	3396	53.1		
Any stigmatizing term (excl. junkie & clean)	292	45.1	496	54.1	556	47.8	830	44.9	3106	48.5		
Addict	205	31.7	329	35.9	346	29.8	474	25.7	2069	32.3		
Substance/drug/opioid/etc. abuser	15	2.3	21	2.3	21	1.8	37	2.0	155	2.4		
Substance/drug/opioid/etc. abuse	157	24.3	306	33.4	375	32.2	520	28.2	1852	28.9		
Clean	74	11.4	124	13.5	142	12.2	208	11.3	865	13.5		
Junkie	21	3.2	22	2.4	20	1.7	32	1.7	183	2.9		
Less stigmatizing terms												
Any less stigmatizing term	8	1.2	23	2.5	43	3.7	76	4.1	157	2.5		
Substance/opioid/etc. use disorder	8	1.2	23	2.5	43	3.7	76	4.1	157	2.5		
Person/individual/etc. with substance/opioid/etc. use disorder	2	0.3	2	0.2	5	0.4	11	0.6	20	0.3		

Appendix B. Number and percent of news stories mentioning specific stigmatizing and alternative terms, by type of news source

	Print news totals		Print Op-Ed totals		TV news totals		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
All articles with at least 3 mentions	4391		327		1681		6399	
Stigmatizing terms								
Any stigmatizing or potentially stigmatizing term (incl. junkie & clean)	2158	49.1	208	63.6	1030	61.3	3396	53.1
Any stigmatizing term (excl. junkie & clean)	2002	45.6	201	61.5	903	53.7	3106	48.5
Addict	1224	27.9	123	37.6	722	43.0	2069	32.3
Substance/drug/opioid/etc. abuser	118	2.7	18	5.5	19	1.1	155	2.4
Substance/drug/opioid/etc. abuse	1315	29.9	140	42.8	397	23.6	1852	28.9
Clean	407	9.3	29	8.9	429	25.5	865	13.5
Junkie	112	2.6	5	1.5	66	3.9	183	2.9
Less stigmatizing terms								
Any less stigmatizing term	122	2.8	23	7.0	12	0.7	157	2.5
Substance/opioid/etc. use disorder	122	2.8	23	7.0	12	0.7	157	2.5
Person/individual/etc. with substance/opioid/etc. use disorder	13	0.3	6	1.8	1	0.1	20	0.3

Appendix C. Number of news stories mentioning any terms, by year and source

	7/2008–6/ 2009		7/2009–6/ 2010		7/2010–6/ 2011		7/2011–6/ 2012		7/2012–6/ 2013		7/2013–6/ 2014		7/2014–6/ 2015		7/2015–6/ 2016		7/2016–6/ 2017		7/2017–6/ 2018		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	Any stigmatizing terms																					
New York Times	15	51.7	27	67.5	16	72.7	15	60.0	13	61.9	33	53.2	48	68.6	83	75.5	87	70.2	143	59.6	480	64.6
USA Today	0	0.0	2	100	1	100	6	100	5	62.5	11	73.3	9	52.9	16	59.3	17	63.0	24	50.0	91	60.3
Washington Post	14	48.3	10	58.8	12	66.7	6	42.9	5	55.6	36	63.2	36	60.0	63	67.0	74	54.8	111	54.1	367	57.5
New York Post	3	33.3	4	23.5	4	44.4	4	44.4	3	23.1	15	51.7	1	10.0	5	25.0	15	41.7	20	38.5	74	36.3
Philadelphia Inquirer	5	38.5	3	100	6	25.0	6	66.7	17	34.7	28	59.6	16	53.3	44	54.3	79	57.7	33	38.8	237	49.6
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	3	60.0	1	25.0	1	100	2	50.0	3	37.5	7	63.6	4	23.5	9	50.0	13	39.4	35	50.0	78	45.6
Tampa Bay Times	2	50.0	4	57.1	5	55.6	4	50.0	2	40.0	5	71.4	3	33.3	12	70.6	9	40.9	49	65.3	95	58.3
Chicago Daily Herald	10	26.3	29	44.6	17	32.1	30	39.0	23	33.8	77	51.3	96	38.4	90	48.9	62	37.6	108	40.9	542	41.2
Minneapolis Star Tribune	0	0.0	3	50.0	3	42.9	6	46.2	9	52.9	20	52.6	14	46.7	25	50.0	30	51.7	42	45.2	152	48.3
San Diego Union Tribune	2	33.3	0	0.0	4	66.7	2	40.0	3	42.9	11	68.8	9	56.3	16	50.0	29	44.6	50	42.4	126	46.2
Spokesman-Review	5	62.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	33.3	1	7.7	7	46.7	6	31.6	18	50.0	42	54.5	39	50.6	124	46.3
ABC News	7	87.5	6	75.0	6	60.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	10	52.6	2	40.0	11	78.6	6	40.0	4	18.2	52	51.0
CBS News	0	0.0	3	100	3	100	3	100	2	66.7	14	73.7	5	71.4	18	58.1	16	44.4	24	27.9	88	46.1
CNN	9	60.0	31	66.0	32	72.7	57	85.1	23	74.2	114	79.7	49	59.8	91	58.7	106	66.3	156	57.1	668	65.7
Fox News	2	25.0	2	50.0	4	80.0	4	80.0	4	44.4	15	65.2	9	47.4	15	62.5	28	59.6	54	66.7	137	60.9
NBC News	1	50.0	4	100	0	0.0	3	75.0	1	100	11	52.4	5	83.3	12	52.2	22	84.6	26	44.8	85	58.2
Any less stigmatizing terms																						
New York Times	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	4.5	1	4.0	0	0.0	1	1.6	4	5.7	5	4.5	8	6.5	21	8.8	41	5.5
USA Today	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	6.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	22.2	5	10.4	12	7.9
Washington Post	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.8	1	1.7	7	7.4	6	4.4	16	7.8	31	4.9
New York Post	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Philadelphia Inquirer	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	2.9	3	3.5	8	1.7
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.9	1	5.6	1	3.0	3	4.3	6	3.5
Tampa Bay Times	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.9	0	0.0	5	6.7	6	3.7
Chicago Daily Herald	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.4	0	0.0	6	3.6	9	3.4	16	1.2
Minneapolis Star Tribune	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	2	3.4	3	3.2	6	1.9
San Diego Union Tribune	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	6.3	0	0.0	3	4.6	4	3.4	8	2.9
Spokesman-Review	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	5.6	5	6.5	4	5.2	11	4.1
ABC News	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
CBS News	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
CNN	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.7	0	0.0	6	3.9	2	1.3	3	1.1	12	1.2
Fox News	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
NBC News	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

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