
SPRING 2023

HEALTHCARE JOURNALIST AND COMMUNICATORS SURVEY

A post-pandemic world reveals new challenges for healthcare communications.



WRITTEN BY:

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2023: THE TURNING POINT

As COVID-19 communications decrease, the demand for targeted thought leadership is surging, indicating a pivotal point for healthcare communications practices.

For more than three years, journalists and healthcare communicators found common ground in the pandemic. There was alignment that COVID-19 was the big story, acceptance of the limitations that it created, and in most cases, an understanding that journalists and communications professionals needed each other to succeed. As we emerge from the pandemic, and the healthcare industry faces new financial challenges, communicators must look ahead to the future of our industry. Staying in touch with the rapidly evolving media landscape is crucial.

2023

HEALTHCARE JOURNALIST AND COMMUNICATORS SURVEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, we face a turning point. We are seeing a divergence between healthcare communicators and journalists. While the two groups have common stressors, how they aim to achieve their goals and the stories they hope to tell are less aligned than in recent years.

The team at MediaSource makes it a priority to understand what communicators and journalists are experiencing, while staying ahead of what's to come. To forecast the media landscape for 2023, we surveyed both journalists and healthcare communications professionals in an effort to establish common ground and identify differences. The results are highlighted in this report, along with pro-tips on how to best service the changing needs of the news media in order to succeed for your organization.

WHAT WE ASKED JOURNALISTS

- Have your work habits changed since the pandemic?
- How is news-gathering changing post-pandemic?
- How important is COVID-19 coverage?
- Since the pandemic, is your newsroom better staffed to cover health news?
- Which health topics do you anticipate covering in 2023?
- Do you feel supported by public relations professionals in your diversity initiatives?

WHAT WE ASKED COMMUNICATORS

- How important is COVID-19 coverage?
- What health topics do you want to promote?
- Which topics in the news media would your leadership find difficult to participate in?
- What are the top diversity initiatives in order of priority to your organization in 2023?
- How has your job's level of pressure and/or goal intensity changed in the past year?
- What is your biggest communications goal for your organization for 2023?
- How has the pandemic affected media access to your facilities?

THE STATE OF JOURNALISM

Much of the world has returned to 'normal' and so has the news cycle for many journalists. Gone are the days of daily COVID-19 updates leading a newscast or as the banner headline in a newspaper. Journalists are juggling different stories at the same time, from breaking news to parenting to healthcare and beyond. Working from home is still common for reporters, specifically for freelance and print journalists. Some are in a hybrid role or completely remote. For many in television, they have returned to the office, or they never really left.

While the importance of COVID-19 as a story differs from journalist to journalist, 73% say it is somewhat, very or extremely important. This is down from 91% in 2022.

73%

of **journalists** say COVID-19 is somewhat, very or extremely important to their newsroom.

54%

of **communicators** say being featured in COVID-19-related news is somewhat, very or extremely important to their organization.

92%

of **journalists** say their work habits have changed.

HOW JOURNALISTS' WORK LIFE CHANGED

“Since the pandemic, I now work full time from home, but go into the office for high profile guests and big news events.”

- NATIONAL SENIOR PRODUCER, TV NEWS -

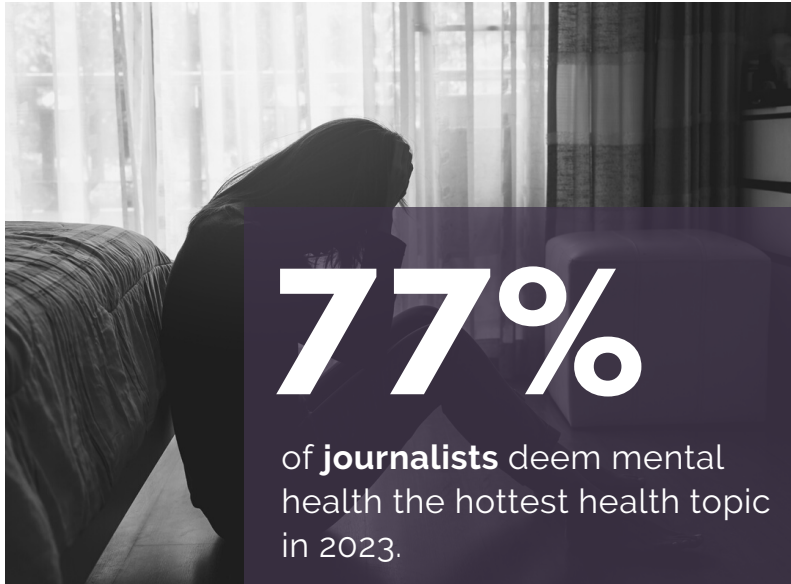
“I continue to do more Zoom interviews more often. I rarely did a phone interview pre-pandemic.”

- REGIONAL REPORTER, TV NEWS -

“Since the pandemic, I now include more sources in my health stories.”

- NATIONAL REPORTER, PRINT/ONLINE -

WHAT JOURNALISTS WANT TO COVER



77%

of **journalists** deem mental health the hottest health topic in 2023.

WHAT CHANGED FROM 2022

Coverage of mental health is increasing in popularity. In 2022, 68% of journalists deemed mental health an important coverage topic. Now, 77% of journalists deem mental health as the hottest health topic in 2023. Additionally, the cost of health care, access to care, and feel-good health stories are also topics journalists plan cover.

Despite the intensity of health and medical coverage sparked by the global pandemic, less than a third of surveyed journalists (28%) believe their newsrooms are now better staffed to handle health-related topics. This indicates that being a helpful communicator in the health and medical field is extremely important — and will be appreciated by short-staffed media outlets in need of content and trusted health sources.

TOPICS JOURNALISTS EXPECT TO COVER IN 2023

Note: Respondents could choose multiple options

- Mental Health- 77%
- Cost of Health Care- 55%
- Access to Care- 53%
- Feel-Good Stories- 50%
- Equity in Health Care- 48%
- Medical Research- 48%
- Pandemic-Driven Changes- 46%
- Reproductive Health/Abortion- 45%
- Health Innovation- 43%
- Gun Control/Mass Casualty - 43%
- Pediatric Health- 41%
- Specific Health Conditions- 41%
- Medication/Pharmaceutical- 37%
- Digital Health- 37%
- Provider Shortage- 36%
- Climate Change- 35%
- Recession/Economy - 34%
- Health Policy- 33%
- Population Health- 31%
- Supply Chain- 27%
- Quality and Patient Safety- 26%
- Gender-Affirming Care- 25%
- Sustainable Practices - 17%
- Medical Logistics and Supplies- 10%

TURNING POINTS IN CONTENT CREATION AND COLLECTION

Journalists continue to use the tools they leaned on during the pandemic in their newsgathering today. We asked journalists to rank the pandemic changes they're still using when it comes to gathering information or conducting interviews for their stories. We found that most journalists are still using Zoom for interviews, utilizing quotes via email, and using photos from the public for stories. Those who work in television say they still prefer in-person interviews so they can have the final say in the end quality when possible. Across all mediums, journalists do ask their interviewees to submit photos and videos.

WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT UTILIZING MULTIMEDIA FROM OUTSIDE SOURCES

"We ask for more photos from people being interviewed for stories (specifically central characters), because there is less time being spent out in the field to gather those elements for ourselves."

National TV Anchor

"Content from reputable organizations is allowed on occasion, but we disclose with verbal and visual cues for our viewers."

Local Newspaper Management

"We have fewer staff members due to downsizing, so we seek more photos and press release submissions."

Regional News Editor

"We are more likely to use cellphone footage (shot holding phone horizontally) more than ever. Some small stations send reporters out with phones only."

Local TV Reporter

64%

of **journalists** say they will accept content from a reputable source.

40%

say they will accept submitted content, such as multimedia, if they don't have enough staff to send a crew.



WHAT JOURNALISTS NEED FROM YOU



“

Build a relationship. Get me on the phone and talk to me for a five-minute conversation. Then email me. We have to return to some old school newsroom practices. Digital pitches are saturating our boxes. Break through the noise and make a phone call.

NATIONAL ANCHOR
- TV NEWS -

Journalists receive hundreds of emails each week, if not thousands. Be on top of the news cycle and understand what is happening in the world. Know who you are pitching and what they cover. Make your resources available and convenient.

Be prepared to address their questions:
WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN AND WHY.

“Don’t send us a bunch of pitches that we wouldn’t normally take. Know our people and content, and anticipate what we would use and/or like.”

- REGIONAL ANCHOR - TV NEWS -

“Offering experts, particularly experts of color, to comment on more trending news stories or relevant topics would be huge.”

- NATIONAL REPORTER - PRINT/ONLINE -

“We like and need to hear from real-life people. We need more than a media-trained person reading a script. We need experience and emotion.”

- LOCAL PRODUCER - TV NEWS -

THE STATE OF HEALTHCARE COMMUNICATIONS

Communications strategies are at a turning point in 2023. While many government and private agencies began the rollback of COVID-era protocols many months ago, the language on how to move forward and the tactics to communicate it in the wake of changing health perceptions, health benefits, and cost structures are just beginning.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the crucial role that public relations, marketing, and communications all play in hospitals and health organizations. In the post-pandemic era, in order to compete in an increasingly crowded healthcare landscape, health-focused organizations will need to continue to prioritize effective communication with stakeholders, including patients, staff, partners, customers, and the public.

While the road ahead may be less uncertain in many ways, the increased pressure that communicators feel is clear. Pressure is increasing, and resources, including human power, aren't keeping pace.



WHAT COMMUNICATORS SHARED

“Quality over quantity appears to be more important than ever, with results expected sooner rather than later. Also, it’s expected that results be measurable in more specific ways than simply tallying the number of media placements.”

“Leadership changes have led to unclear health system goals.”

“Staff departures have led to difficulty finding replacements who want to work on-site or hybrid.”

“We have had to pull back on communication initiatives because we have less staff to complete the activities.”

WHAT HEALTHCARE COMMUNICATORS WANT COVERED



Healthcare communicators balance many priorities, and when asked what topic they want journalists to cover about their organization, 70% of surveyed communicators cited health innovation as the topic they'd most like to promote to the news media in 2023. This was a noted difference from only 43% of journalists who say they are interested in this topic. This indicates that "innovation" won't be the most impactful buzzword to attract headlines in 2023. So, developing a strategy and utilizing creativity to ensure your story goes beyond the surface level will pay dividends when promoting scientific advancements, new models of care, and changes in your organization.

PRO TIPS: HOW TO GET YOUR PRIORITIES IN THE NEWS

- Watch for breaking opportunities to tie your thought leadership to the news cycle.
- Be predictive about the news cycle and have your content and experts ready to go. Monitor big events such as the State of the Union and announcements by organizations like the CDC and FDA to see where your brand may fit.
- Think like a journalist. Replace health industry buzzwords with language that a journalist could use in their own story.

TOPICS COMMUNICATORS WANT TO PROMOTE IN 2023

Note: Respondents could choose multiple options

- Health Innovation- 70%
- Feel-Good Health Stories- 66%
- Mental Health- 62%
- Medical Research- 58%
- Equity in Health Care- 58%
- Specific Health Conditions- 58%
- Access to Care- 52%
- Pediatric Health- 44%
- Population Health- 42%
- Quality & Patient Safety- 32%
- Cost of Health Care- 24%
- Health Policy- 24%
- Digital Health- 22%
- Medication/Pharmaceutical- 20%
- Climate Change- 18%
- Pandemic-Driven Changes- 18%
- Supply Chain- 16%
- Provider Shortage- 14%
- Gender-Affirming Care- 12%
- Recession/Economy & Health- 12%
- Medical Logistics & Supplies- 8%
- Sustainable Practices - 8%
- Gun Control/Mass Casualty - 4%
- Reproductive Health/Abortion- 4%

IMPACT OF ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY

As of early 2023, the hospital and healthcare industry's finances are in a state of uncertainty due to several factors. The pandemic created significant financial challenges, including increased costs and decreases in revenue. Additionally, there is a growing concern about the impact of rising healthcare costs on patients and the overall economy. The future will likely depend on a range of factors, including government policies, healthcare reforms, and technological advancements.

As a result, healthcare organizations will need to find new and creative ways to engage with patients and the community, while operating within tighter budgets. The need for transparency surrounding healthcare system finances underscores the need for flexible and adaptable marketing and public relations strategies that can evolve in response to changing economic conditions. This may drive communicators to face new challenges like learning new tactics, shifting or adding more key audiences to their strategies, and more issues management.

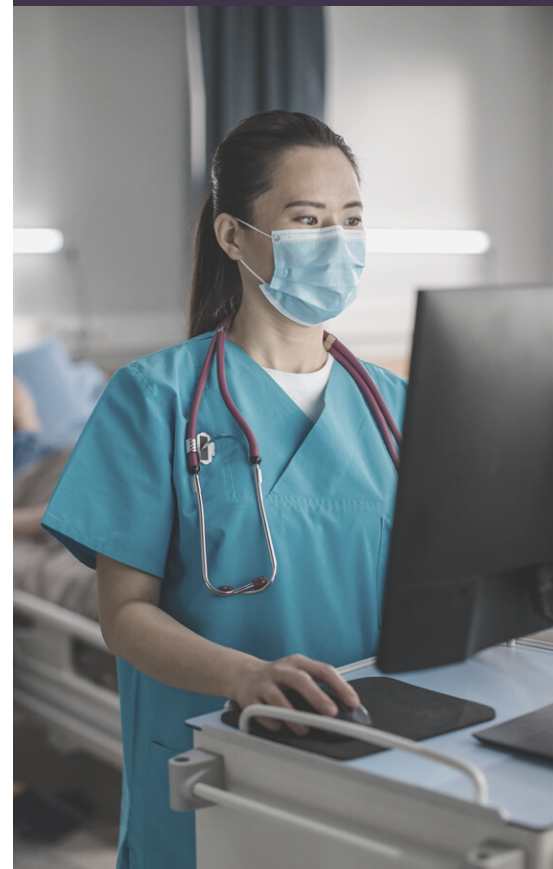
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The economy plays a role when we are working to pick story topics. We want to be sensitive to the situation. However, we are increasingly tasked with tying healthcare stories to the economy.

- HEALTHCARE COMMUNICATOR -

TOP THREE CURRENT OR ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES FOR COMMUNICATORS

1. Garnering coverage for key thought leaders or spokespersons
2. Showing that communications work directly ties to business goals
3. Reporting the right metrics in a meaningful way to leadership



COMMON GROUND BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND COMMUNICATORS



SHARED STRESSORS

Journalists and healthcare communicators share common work concerns. Their top stressors include:

- Economic pressure of being asked to do more with fewer resources
- Pressure of redefining and achieving goals in a post-pandemic world

WHERE STORY INTERESTS ALIGN

Our survey revealed that mental health is a popular topic with both journalists (77%) and communicators (62%) reporting high interest. Both groups also agree that feel-good health stories are a priority, which is a benefit for health organizations that want to showcase their compassionate care. Our data also showed that there is dual interest in health stories about access to care with 53% of journalists and 52% of communicators showing interest in this topic.

WHAT STORIES DO YOU WANT TO COVER?

COMMUNICATORS

1. HEALTH INNOVATION
2. **FEEL-GOOD HEALTH STORIES**
3. **MENTAL HEALTH**
4. **MEDICAL RESEARCH**
5. **EQUITY IN HEALTH CARE**
6. SPECIFIC HEALTH CONDITIONS
7. **ACCESS TO CARE**
8. PEDIATRIC HEALTH

JOURNALISTS

1. **MENTAL HEALTH**
2. COST OF HEALTH CARE
3. **ACCESS TO CARE**
4. **FEEL-GOOD HEALTH STORIES**
5. **EQUITY IN HEALTH CARE**
6. **MEDICAL RESEARCH**
7. PANDEMIC-DRIVEN CHANGES
8. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH/ABORTION

TIP FOR COMMUNICATORS: Pitch topics in **BOLD** to increase placement chances

GETTING POLITICAL: STORYTELLING CHALLENGES

WHERE STORY INTERESTS CONFLICT

The survey results highlight a clear disconnect between communicators and journalists on the idea of covering health stories with a political connection.

Journalists reported high interest in covering politically-coded health stories, including gun control and mass casualty events (43%), reproductive health, (45%) and gender-affirming care. While in many cases, journalists are seeking sources to provide an evidence-based perspective, this is still a difficult position for health communicators. Since health systems are primarily focused on providing care to patients and their families, any political issue that distracts from this focus may be seen as a negative by patients, staff, or other stakeholders and could lead to a loss of trust.

Added caution is needed when discussing politically charged issues in the press to ensure that any communication is carefully crafted, crystal clear, and consistent with the health system's mission and values. This can make participation in sensitive topics difficult to deliver on a journalist's deadline, if at all. This explains, for example, why the rate of communicators willing to address stories relating to gender-affirming care is only 12%, even though it ranks higher on the journalists' interest list, at around 25%.

ONLY 4%

of health care **communicators** expressed a willingness to comment on gun control stories or national reproductive health stories.



CHALLENGING STORY TOPICS

Top 5 topics that healthcare communicators say their organization's leadership would find difficult to talk about externally, compared to how journalists ranked those topics.

COMMUNICATORS

1. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH
2. GUN CONTROL
3. GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE
4. COST OF HEALTHCARE
5. CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

JOURNALISTS

8. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH
9. GUN CONTROL
22. GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE
2. COST OF HEALTHCARE
16. CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

TIP FOR COMMUNICATORS: Strategize early about how you will respond to requests to discuss these challenging topics

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

The lack of interest in addressing some of today's challenging issues can put a strain on the communicator-journalist relationship. If communicators are consistently unable to connect journalists with sources for political healthcare stories, it could make getting coverage of a healthcare organization's key topics more difficult. These divergent interests set the stage for a divide between journalist and communicator not seen since before the pandemic.

However, there are ways for communicators to elevate their brand's stories and experts and meet the needs of journalists without stepping into a political minefield.



TIPS FOR COMMUNICATORS

PROMOTE YOUR SOLUTION

While no healthcare brand wants to discuss the problems they may face in challenging areas such as healthcare costs or access to care, if your organization has a solution to a challenging political topic, consider proactively seeking media coverage built around your solution. Before approaching the media, create a roadmap of your ideal story so that you have a guide for working with the journalist. Provide the media with data that showcases your success.

TOUT YOUR EXPERT

If your organization feels confident speaking about a challenging issue, a compelling thought leader can bridge the gap by connecting your leadership and point of view to the deeper issues impacting the healthcare industry. For these hot-button stories it is more important than ever to have a media trained expert who is educated on your organization's message and who understands how to redirect a conversation with a reporter.

KNOW WHEN TO SAY NO

When you encounter a media request that you simply cannot accommodate, you should decline the opportunity as quickly as possible. This shows respect for the journalist, allowing them adequate time to find another expert and increasing your chance of coverage on a different topic in the future.

POSITIONING YOUR THOUGHT LEADERS ON KEY MESSAGES



Beyond the need to elevate brand stories and innovations within their organizations, communicators are tasked with highlighting key spokespeople in the news media. It can be difficult to break through the clutter and position experts as leaders among the news media, however, in looking at the journalist responses from this year, communicators can begin to make adjustments to bridge the gap.

ACT QUICKLY

Journalists are asking for more options when it comes to expert commentary. As awareness months or breaking news events make headlines, have your list of experts who can speak with authority about the topic ready to go. Proactively approach the media with your expert and their unique point of view. It's important to pitch the media quickly on trending topics as journalists working on tight deadlines move with speed.

BUILD CREDIBILITY

National healthcare journalists are more likely to trust your expert as a credible source when they have an established placement record. To build the credibility of your SME, start with smaller local placements and trade outlets that give your spokesperson practice and experience. Another tactic is to seek outlets that accept guest articles or op-eds where you can work with your expert to draft precise messaging.

BE PATIENT

When it comes to pitching top spokespeople and the specific stories they want to tell, communicators need to remember to be patient. Often the topics your leadership wants to discuss aren't topping the headlines on a daily basis. But, there is a place for these stories. It might take deeper research and more time spent nurturing relationships with journalists before you're able to secure that key placement.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Since the summer of 2020, there has been a national push to raise the voices of those historically marginalized and shed light on the drastic systemic disparities and inequities that plague the country. Strides have been made to diversify the points of view that are prominent in local, regional, and national media. While our journalist partners have taken steps within their own organizations to remedy this issue, the job of communicators is to help the news media move forward on this issue.

After almost three years of concentrated efforts to make changes, we're hearing from journalists that communicators are better at supporting them in this effort than in the past.

The communications industry is making strides to change the decades-long neglect of these perspectives, and we continue to look within our organizations with renewed perspective to find ways to tell these stories. Promoting diversity and inclusion through storytelling is and will continue to be an opportunity for communicators in 2023 and beyond.

LEARNING FROM THE PANDEMIC

The past three years of news coverage, which were dominated by COVID-19 stories, may leave communicators wondering, "What's next?" Though we're seeing an array of topics take over the headlines, pandemic lessons learned bring forth opportunities for communicators to move forward.

The pandemic, and our country's response to the pandemic, further brought to light issues with health disparities and access to care that have long existed within our system. Throughout the stages of the pandemic, we saw the inefficiencies and biases that exist.

As we look to the future, we have the opportunity to share the lessons our organizations have learned from this experience and to showcase our solutions. Being able to reflect on growth and change since the onset of the pandemic in the U.S., and the ways that innovation and new technology can continue to address these issues, will likely be the biggest opportunity for healthcare organizations.

55%

of **journalists** say the PR professionals they work with are supportive partners in telling diverse stories.

However...

30%

think **communicators** can do a better job in this space in terms of offering more diverse spokespeople, story topics, or expert opinions.

“

Being able to display key lessons from the pandemic across our brand to make health care more accessible and streamlined is key.

- HEALTHCARE
COMMUNICATOR -



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CONCLUSION

In 2023 we face a turning point — a potential divergence between healthcare communicators and journalists with differences in goals and story topics of interest. During this pivotal time it's critical to strengthen relationships with journalists, establishing common ground so that we can be partners in providing accurate information, quality content, and diverse sources.

For communicators who don't have the resources to continuously monitor the media and maintain relationships with healthcare journalists, finding strategic partners may be a solution to help bridge the divide and keep your organization part of the conversation.

METHODOLOGY

MediaSource conducted the Healthcare Journalist and Communicators Survey between December 12, 2022 and March 8, 2023.

The survey responses included 102 media professionals who work as journalists for media outlets in television, print, online, or radio.

- 28% Freelance Journalist
- 21% Anchor/Host
- 17% Producer
- 16% Reporter/Writer
- 9% Editor
- 6% Management
- 2% Scheduler/Booker
- 1% Web Producer

We conducted our survey of healthcare communicators between December 22, 2022 and March 8, 2023 by reaching out to qualified health industry communicators via various professional organizations. The survey was completed via email. 50 healthcare communicators completed the survey.



LET'S CONNECT

Lisa Arledge Powell is the president of MediaSource, a story-centric communications agency that helps brands reach the news media and other target audiences using storytelling with purpose. MediaSource is proud to be certified as an official women's business enterprise by the [Women's Business Enterprise National Council](#).

In the past year, MediaSource has secured over 20,000 media placements nationwide and interviews for thought leaders on the latest trends, innovations, and issues facing the healthcare industry.

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