

Media Messages about Genetics

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Objective:

Since genetic technologies are relatively new, newspaper reports are one of the primary means through which the general public receives information about them. The objective of this study is to examine the messages about genetics and genetic technology that the public gets from national and regional newspapers.

Methods:

We used 7 trigger words to identify articles on genetics-related topics from 13 newspapers for the 4-month period from October 1, 2005 through January 31, 2006. The newspapers were selected from those available online from ProQuest to balance circulation size and geography. A total of 896 relevant articles were identified. The content of the articles was coded using an electronic coding scheme that included topics, sources, tone and descriptive information. Inter-coder reliability was established and monitored periodically throughout the coding process.

Conclusions:

- ❖ Genetics issues are receiving significant attention in national and regional newspapers.
- ❖ The specific genetic issues discussed in the articles vary by newspaper and geographic region.
- ❖ The tone of the articles (problem, benefit, or neutral) also varies by topic and by newspaper.

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Salt Lake Tribune

San Francisco Chronicle

Orange County Register

USA Today

Houston Chronicle

Baton Rouge Advocate

Chicago Tribune

Boston Globe

New York Times

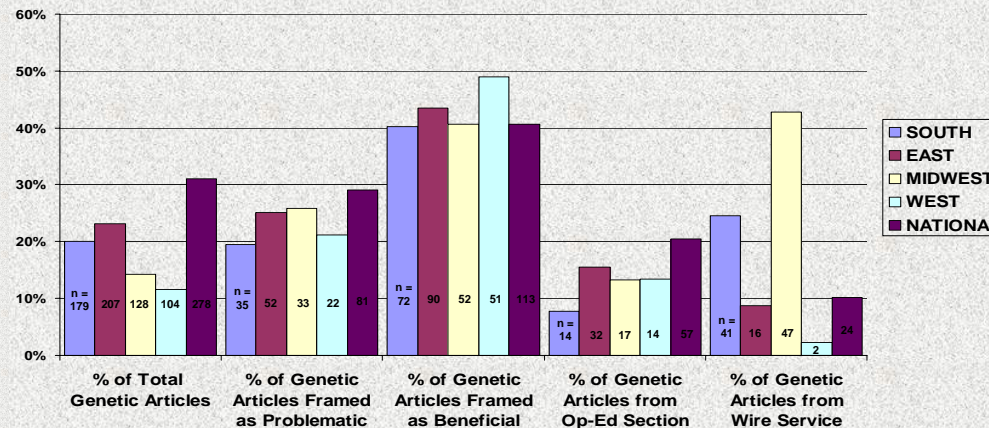
Wall Street Journal

Washington Post

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Points of Interest:

- ❖ Legal issues were discussed in 24% of all articles, and were a dominant theme in 6 papers.
- ❖ Bioethics issues were important to the content of 17% of all articles, particularly in the New York Times (22%), the San Francisco Chronicle (27%), and the Wall Street Journal (29%).
- ❖ Cloning was a focus of 17% of all articles, nearly two-thirds of which were in four papers (21% were in the New York Times alone; the Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, and Wall Street Journal each had 13-14%).
- ❖ The most frequently discussed social issues included agriculture, race/ethnicity, and environment/gene interactions.
- ❖ In several content areas, a large number of articles focused more on the problematic aspects of the topic. This was most true for articles discussing bioethics issues (54% of all articles) and cloning (48%), and least true for articles discussing legal issues (10%).
- ❖ Where articles framed genetics issues as problems, responsible parties were listed as researchers (25% of the articles), government (13%), and business (8%). Widespread coverage of the South Korean cloning research scandal during the study period contributed to this result.
- ❖ Articles that focused more on the beneficial aspects of their topic most often discussed legal issues (particularly forensics), technology, and research funding.
- ❖ Dominant themes for opinion and editorial (op-ed) articles included social issues, legal issues, government activities, bioethics, and the suppliers of genetics services.



Trigger Words:

Genom* Gene
 Geneti* DNA
 Clon* Pharmaco*
 Family history