

Welcome!

In August of 2022, television host Bill Maher claimed “this country has gone from fat acceptance to fat celebration.” We at the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), an organization that has been advocating to improve the lives of fat people for more than 50 years, really wish Maher was right. But as happens a few times a year, somebody with a national platform says terrible things about fat people, generates a lot of chatter on social and popular media, gets a lot of attention and then goes back on TV to do it again.



Maher is one of many who wring their hands about how the world is “glorifying obesity” when what is actually true is that fat people are neither fully accepted nor celebrated in our culture. Instead, bias against fat people is pervasive, persistent, and life-limiting. The pundits shake their heads; meanwhile fat people continue to face discrimination and injustice in nearly every aspect of life.

Despite some advances of body diversity in popular culture, health research and elsewhere, implicit bias against fat people has risen while other kinds of bias have decreased. The news media is contributing to this with a constant stream of fat panic, weight loss content, and erasure of all other kinds of stories about fat people. Those of us who navigate the world in fat bodies know this through experience, but we also know the power of research and evidence. So we asked Pamela Mejia, a nationally recognized expert in media research, to review the past year of coverage of weight in the media.



**national association
to advance
fat acceptance**



THE FINDINGS SHOW

- That diet talk still dominates discussion of higher weight individuals.
- That fat people are almost exclusively discussed in stories about health and health care, and the vast majority of these stories make a baseline assumption that fatness is associated with or causes poor health.
- That too few of these stories include the perspective of actual fat people, and almost none offer the perspective of fat activists and others talking about fat liberation.
- Too many of these stories quote “experts” who are part of institutions funded by diet companies and drug manufacturers, giving them a vested interest in continuing fat panic and encouraging weight loss .

Now, we can use this information to bolster our advocacy with the media and push back on baseless statements from fat hating public personalities. And as we continue to advocate for improved access and opportunity through legislation and corporate policy, we will encourage the media to take notice and tell a more well rounded story about fatness.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER



Pamela Mejia, MS, MPH

I am Head of Research and a Principal Investigator at Berkeley Media Studies Group, a Bay Area nonprofit that is a nationally recognized leader in public health and media advocacy. For more than 10 years, I've developed and led BMSG's quantitative and qualitative analyses of how the news characterizes a range of public health and social justice issues, including interpersonal and state violence, food justice, racial equity, housing and homelessness, and reproductive rights.

My research has been published in the American Journal of Public Health and Critical Public Health, and has informed communication strategy for the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and many others.

As a lifelong fat person, and an advocate for fat liberation (ever since my days checking Fat!So?! out of the local library every other week as a kid!), this project was an exciting opportunity to blend my professional expertise and my personal passions and interests.

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You! Thank you for reading. Simply engaging in this conversation makes you more active in the fight for fat rights than many.

Follow NAAFA on social media @naafaofficial or sign up for our newsletter to deepen your relationship with this work.

THE REPORT

Why the News Matters

Understanding news coverage matters because the news is a window into how people are talking and thinking about an issue. Journalists' decisions about how to cover a topic can raise its profile - while topics not covered by the news media are often neglected and remain largely outside public discussion and debate.¹ News coverage also affects how issues are understood by news consumers (including decision makers and policy leaders). For example, news coverage can impact whose perspectives are seen as legitimate, which solutions are lifted up or ignored, and which arguments become popular or accepted. That's because across all media, journalists and other creators "frame" (or, organize) information to create meaning: that is, as they cover stories, journalists select certain arguments, examples, images, messages, and sources to create a picture of the issue. The selection — or exclusion — of arguments and sources works like a frame around a picture, drawing the audience's attention to what information is important and excluding other information.

Methods

To better understand how the news about weight stigma is framed, I collected and reviewed recent national news coverage. Specifically, I used the LexisNexis database to identify news stories that referenced any variation of the term "weight stigma" (including, for example, "weight discrimination" or "weight bias") published in US newspapers or wires between December 1, 2021 and November 30, 2022. For comparison purposes, I also quantified how many stories during the same time period referenced terms like "weight loss," "body positivity," or "fat justice."

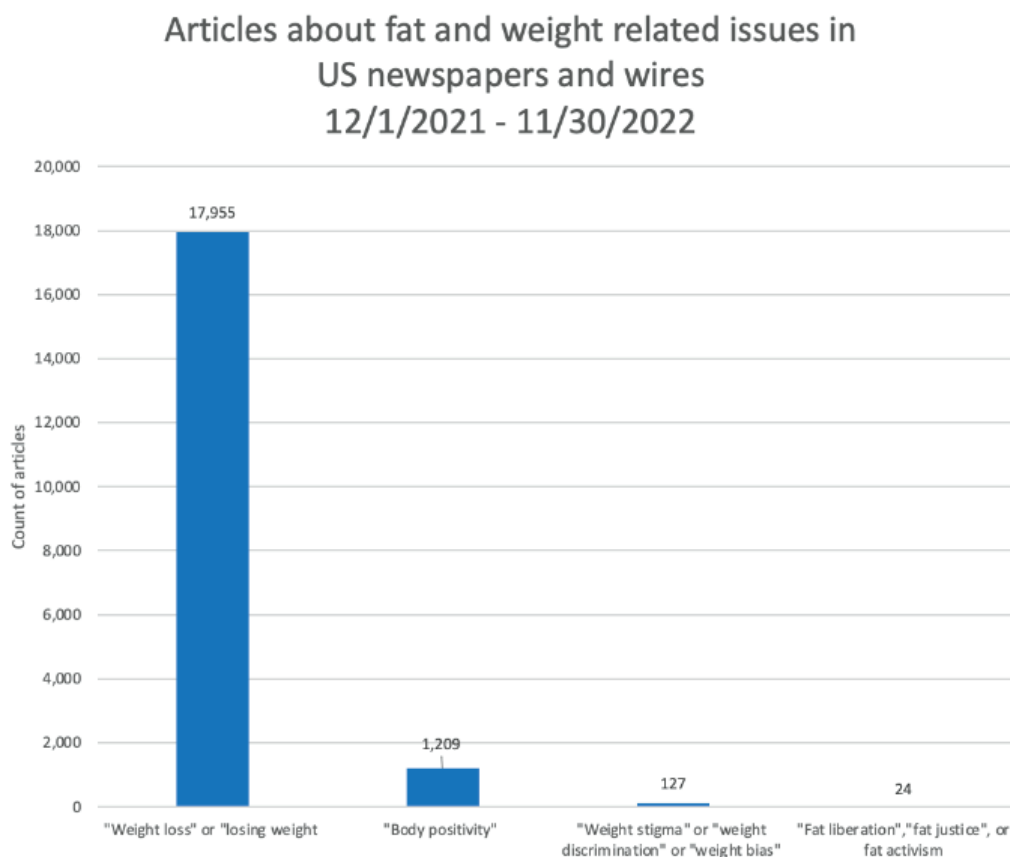
Quantitative (numerical) analysis: I reviewed articles for quantitative data about when and where they were published, and conducted keyword searches to assess how often different terms and phrases (like "obesity," "policy," etc.) appeared. I also assessed whether articles were traditional news stories (that report on events, facts and multiple sides to an issue) or opinion pieces (that take a specific stance on an issue).

Qualitative (descriptive) analysis: I then selected a random sample of articles to review qualitatively. Drawing on my more than 10 years of experience as a media researcher with expertise in ethnographic content analysis,³ I reviewed each article in the sample to identify sources quoted, the main topic of the article, how weight stigma was framed, and other variables.

FINDINGS

News about weight stigma was sparse.

A total of 127 articles that used the phrases “weight stigma,” “weight bias,” or “weight discrimination” were published between December 1, 2021 and November 30, 2022 in U.S. newspapers and wires. By contrast, almost 18,000 articles published in the same time period included at least one reference to “weight loss” or to “losing weight,” while over 1,000 referenced “body positivity.” Only 24 articles used a term like “fat liberation,” “fat justice,” “fat activist” or “fat activism.” None of the articles about weight stigma also mentioned fat liberation.



Of the 127 articles that mentioned weight stigma or weight discrimination, the majority (79, or 62%) were press releases published through wires like PR Newswire or University Wire: the majority of these announced the release of research reports, or the unveiling of new weight loss products or tools. Just 48 articles were written and published by traditional news outlets. Of those, 16 (33% of original articles) were opinion pieces, like editorials, columns, op-eds, or letters to the editor written by news readers. In other words, in the period of our analysis just 32 original news articles about weight stigma appeared in US newspapers.

Medical professionals and researchers dominated the coverage.

Medical professionals and researchers were regularly quoted in news about stigma (53% of articles in qualitative review), as when physician Lisa Erlanger noted, “it’s difficult to practice weight-inclusive care because there are few resources and a lot of institutional pushback,” and concluded, “this is not the first time that medicine has been very, very wrong.”⁴ Among the researchers most commonly quoted was Rebecca Puhl of the the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health: Puhl or the Rudd Center itself were named in almost 1 of 10 articles about weight stigma (9% of all articles).

By contrast, people identified as fat activists were quoted in just 20% of articles reviewed qualitatively: one widely-reprinted article from USA Today, for example, quoted NAAFA Director Tigress Osborn, who observed, “it’s impossible for us to know whether some of the things that are blamed on fat are caused by weight stigma or other forms of oppression.”⁵

Fatness was most often characterized using medical language.

Almost two thirds of articles included at least one reference to medical terms like “obese” or “obesity” to refer to fat people. Indeed, a number of articles referred to obesity as a disease: a widely reprinted article, for example, ran under the headline “1 in 5 children stricken with obesity” in different locations.⁶ Many stories that described obesity as a disease were op-eds written by medical professionals.⁷

Terms like “fat people, or “plus size,” appeared far less frequently in the coverage. A high-profile article from the The New York Times about eating disorders, for example, described the efforts of “a small vanguard of professionals experimenting with ways to improve treatment for people with larger bodies.”⁸

Articles in which term appeared (n=127) (%)

Obese or obesity	77 (61%)
Fat	57 (45%)
Overweight	50 (39%)
People in/with larger bodies	22 (17%)
“Plus size” or “plus-size”	6 (5%)

Most articles framed stigma in the context of health care.

The majority of articles framed weight stigma in the context of access to medical care: as noted elsewhere, the overwhelming majority of stories that referenced stigma were press releases from companies or research institutions releasing data, or announcements of new weight loss products. The focus on health care persisted in original news stories, many of which focused on the impact of stigma on peoples' decisions to seek medical care: a typical story focused on the release of data showing that weight stigma may prevent people from seeking cancer screenings, and included quotes from a researcher who concluded, "obesity stigma needs to be challenged and tackled, especially in health care settings."⁹

Only rarely did articles address the impact of weight stigma on health and emotional outcomes for adults and children. One op-ed author, for example, cited data illustrating that "the emotional toll of weight discrimination alone may be enough to manifest negative consequences."¹⁰ Another widely reprinted news article focused on obesity as a disease to be cured, but did include quotes from a doctor who lamented, "the way we treat children and adults who have high weight is really shameful ... when people do not meet a certain societal ideal of children, young children feel that shame."⁶

Policies to address weight stigma were rarely discussed in-depth.

Though one third of stories did include at least one reference to policies, few articles substantively addressed policies designed to address weight stigma. A rare example was an op-ed from The Press of Atlantic City that argued for a proposed bill "prohibiting prejudice on the basis of weight or height in hiring, housing and educational practices," The editorial board concluded, "the bottom line is that judging someone's natural appearance and holding it against them in any way is unfair and should stop."¹¹

Limitations

This analysis is limited to English-language, print news sources. It did not include other forms of traditional news media such as television or radio, or media in other languages. In addition, although I adhered as closely as possible to best practices in ethnographic content analysis, I was not able to conduct inter-rater reliability testing or use multiple coders to assess content.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research points to many ways that the media could improve coverage of fat people to more accurately reflect our lives and to reduce stigma.

Content

Journalists and editors can ...

- Tell more stories about fat people's rights, and about how we overcome stigma, weight bias and outright discrimination at work, at play and among family and friends.
- Decrease reliance on medical research to drive story ideas, and write fewer stories about fat people in a health, wellness and disease context. Explore other markers of health and interventions that increase people's wellness, including systemic changes that increase access to health care, healthy behaviors and reduced stigma.
- Expand your definition of experts on fatness beyond people with a medical or public health background. Include academics doing research in fat studies, as well as folks active in and leading the movements for fat rights and fat liberation.
- Seek out fat experts for your opinion pages, including those who question or have rejected weight loss culture and diet goals.
- When quoting researchers or medical professionals, identify connections they have to diet industry or pharmaceutical funding that may influence their perspectives.
- Include more fat activists and fat liberationists in your coverage of civil rights, elections and other social justice issues.

Language

Journalists and editors can ...

- Avoid the “o” words (obesity and overweight) and include other ways to talk about fat people. Obesity is a medical term and the obesity medicine community considers all bigger bodies diseased, despite any other indicators of health and wellbeing. Overweight assumes that there is a standard weight, which has no factual basis. Fat liberationists identify these words as slurs, and advocate for the use of descriptive terms like higher weight or larger bodied.
- When speaking of clothes you can use the industry terms Plus Size, Extended Sizes, or Big and Tall. Never use phrases like “for everybody” or “for all sizes” when for clothing lines that only include the smallest plus sizes (1x-3x).
- Fat activists and liberationists often refer to themselves as fat, and that term should be used at the subject's request. Including a short explainer is often useful when there are editorial concerns about whether audiences will object to the word (“So and so self-identifies as fat because she believes it is an adjective like any other that describes her.”)
- Treat fat subjects with care and dignity, using the language and descriptors that they prefer.

Imagery

Journalists and editors can ...

- Include larger bodied people in your photos and illustrations of stories that don't have anything to do with body size. We exist in other contexts.
- Include pictures of our full bodies when practical.
- Avoid weight loss “before and after” juxtapositions, which establish one type of body as better than another type of body
- Do not use filters or photoshop to make us appear less fat.
- Do not use anonymized fat people (i.e. no heads, no faces) to illustrate stories about weight.
- Many stock photo galleries only feature fat people in stereotypical portrayals or in weight loss pursuits. If your publication typically utilizes stock galleries, plan for the possibility that you may need to arrange for alternative photos that show fat people diversely and authentically.
- Make sure photo shoots and locations (including dressing rooms, restrooms, seating) are accessible for larger bodies

IN CONCLUSION

This report shows us the media has a long way to go to accurately and compassionately report on fat people and our efforts to improve access and opportunity. However we do see progress and know that progress is possible, as we have witnessed the media contribute to a better understanding of LGBTQ people, victims of police violence, and more.

At the time of this writing, there are active campaigns for legislation to protect fat people from discrimination in three states and the City of New York. This is an important moment, with many more to come, and we hope the media takes this opportunity to cover these groundbreaking campaigns and their impact.

Because ultimately the way the media covers fat people and weight bias is not a matter of semantics, consideration, or kindness. Contributing to a better understanding of fat people, the challenges we face, and our efforts to alleviate those challenges can be life saving intervention if we can reduce stigma and increase access to healthcare, housing, employment, and all of the markers of a full and fulfilling life.



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