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## Original Research

# A review of UK media coverage of physical activity associated with the publication of special issues in a high-impact medical journal

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The media is a substantial vehicle for conveying public health messages to the public. This study examined the extent to which the publication of special issues in a high-impact medical journal in 2012 and 2016 generated media interest in physical activity and health in the UK and explored the main issues that were reported.

**Study design:** This is a systematic narrative review of print media.

**Methods:** Relevant print news articles were identified by searching Factiva and Google News. The timeframe of each search was 2 weeks, using the publication date of each special issue as the anchor point. Overall, 20 articles were included in the analysis for 2012 and 37 articles for 2016.

**Results:** The news media coverage was encouraging for the profile of physical activity and health. In 2012 and 2016, common themes included the benefits of physical activity and the risks of being inactive, comparisons between mortality rates from physical inactivity and smoking and the recommended volume of physical activity to benefit health.

**Conclusions:** The profile given to an issue through prestigious scientific publication is one of the levers for community attention and policy change. Efforts are needed to further use the media for improving policy, practice and public awareness, which are antecedents to population health change.

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## Introduction

The history of epidemiological evidence of the health benefits of physical activity dates back to the 1950s.<sup>1,2</sup> Based on this cumulative evidence, 150 weekly minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity are recommended for health.<sup>3,4</sup> Data suggest

that many adults in the UK do not achieve recommended physical activity levels<sup>5</sup> and also that awareness of the current physical activity recommendations is relatively low.<sup>6</sup>

The production and distribution of health information, for example, through leaflets, newspaper articles and radio and television adverts, are aimed at three key outcomes: increasing knowledge of accurate health information;

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changing health-related attitudes; and influencing health behaviours.<sup>7</sup> While the media environment is ill defined, several facets are useful to consider: delivery platforms and channels; the amount of media consumed; the content of the media consumed; and the commercial purpose of media content.<sup>7</sup>

While many people now prefer to ‘read on screen’, newspapers—including print and online—are still consumed by a large proportion of the UK adult population on a regular basis.<sup>8,9</sup> While it is not well understood how effective print media can be in changing knowledge, attitude and behaviour towards physical activity (in contrast to mass communication campaigns, for example), it is important to ensure that media coverage is based on sound evidence, is presented in a balanced and fair way, is represented in the way the authors of the evidence intended and that the exposure of an issue is proportional to its importance.

In 2012, the medical journal, the *Lancet*, published a special issue on the topic of physical activity, thematically aligned to coincide with the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games (<http://www.thelancet.com/series/physical-activity>). The *Lancet* strives to make science widely available and at a global scale and achieves this through publishing globally relevant articles and ensuring that the research receives appropriate exposure and mobilisation to influence policy and practice.<sup>10</sup> As one of the most prestigious medical journals, the publication of a *Lancet* special issue denoted a landmark development in the field of physical activity and health and provided an important opportunity to raise awareness of the issue.

The special issue was launched on 18 July 2012, less than 2 weeks before the start of the London 2012 Olympics. The focus of this *Lancet* series was to identify physical inactivity as a global health issue relevant to non-communicable disease prevention. In addition, the timing with the London Olympics was intentional, with the aim of increasing appreciation of the societal and health benefits of physical activity for everyone, alongside the (Olympic) investment in elite sport and ‘mega events’.<sup>11</sup> The 2012 *Lancet* physical activity series comprised five articles covering the following topics: the global burden of physical inactivity; levels and trends in physical activity worldwide; correlates of physical activity; evidence-based strategies for effective physical activity programmes; and how a multisector and systems-wide policy approach is essential for increasing population levels of physical activity.

A second special issue on physical activity was published in the *Lancet* in 2016, published to coincide with the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games (<http://www.thelancet.com/series/physical-activity-2016>). The 2016 special issue updated the evidence on physical activity and health, surveillance, interventions and policy. It featured the first global estimate of the economic burden of physical inactivity and the largest harmonised meta-analysis on the joint health effects of physical activity and sedentary (sitting) behaviour.

This article aimed to examine the newspaper coverage generated by the 2012 and 2016 *Lancet* special issues in the UK. The specific research questions were the following:

- 1) How much newspaper coverage was generated in the UK after the publication of the *Lancet* 2012 and 2016 special issues on physical activity?
- 2) What types of issues related to physical activity featured in the media coverage?
- 3) How was the issue of physical activity framed within the media?
- 4) How did media coverage of the 2012 and 2016 special issues differ?

The study was restricted to the UK media for several reasons. The culture of media varies by country and thus taking a more global view of media coverage may mask the differences in the way the media operate nationally. The launch events for both series of the *Lancet* were held in the UK, which may have led to greater interest from the media to that observed in other countries. Furthermore, focussing on the UK (as opposed to global coverage) provided a clear denominator of media coverage for analysis.

## Methods

Relevant media articles were identified by searching Factiva ([www.factiva.com](http://www.factiva.com)) and Google News (<http://news.google.com>). Google News covers over 50,000 news sources worldwide. Factiva covers only 10,000 international news sources but covers all UK national and many local newspapers. By including both these major databases, the search can be presumed to be comprehensive. The search was conducted on 27 October 2016 using the search terms ‘physical activity’ AND ‘*Lancet*’. The timeframe of each search was 2 weeks, using the publication date of each *Lancet* series as the anchor point. Thus, the analysis covered the timeframes of 18 July to 1 August 2012 and 27 July to 10 August 2016; beyond these dates, the news feeds were overwhelmed with reporting the respective Olympics. The Factiva search was limited to ‘Newspapers: UK’ (print and online) and the Google News search was filtered by ‘UK region’, excluding blogs. All articles were considered relevant if they focussed on physical activity and made reference to the *Lancet* special issues.

The data were analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. A data extraction sheet was developed to structure the qualitative content analysis. This included a series of a priori codes that were developed by the research team based on the anticipated content of the media coverage. Each article was read by two members of the research team (K.M. and B.M.G.). One researcher (K.M.) extracted each line of content from each article and attempted to assign it to a code using the data extraction sheet. Additional codes were created for relevant data that did not fit any of the pre-existing codes. The second researcher (B.M.G.) followed the same coding procedure. Three members of the research team (K.M., B.M.G., J.C.) reviewed the two sets of analysis and discussed any discrepancies between the assigned codes. These discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached on the most appropriate code for each sentence of text. Frequencies were calculated to determine the total volume of media coverage related to each code in both 2012 and 2016. Qualitative content analysis was used to explore the ways in which the media coverage reported on the ten most common themes in each year. This involved a review of the similarities and differences

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