



Social Networks and Popular Understanding of Science and Health: Sharing Disparities

Brian G. Southwell

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Using social media and peer-to-peer networks to teach people about science and health may seem like an obvious strategy. Yet recent research suggests that systematic reliance on social networks may be a recipe for inequity. People are not consistently inclined to share information with others around them, and many people are constrained by factors outside of their immediate control. Ironically, the highly social nature of humankind complicates the extent to which we can live in a society united solely by electronic media.

Stretching well beyond social media, this book documents disparate tendencies in the ways people learn and share information about health and science. By reviewing a wide array of existing research—ranging from a survey of New Orleans residents in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina to analysis of Twitter posts related to H1N1 to a physician-led communication campaign explaining the benefits of vaginal birth—Brian G. Southwell explains why some types of information are more likely to be shared than others and how some people never get exposed to seemingly widely available information.

This book will appeal to social science students and citizens interested in the role of social networks in information diffusion and yet it also serves as a cautionary tale for communication practitioners and policymakers interested in leveraging social ties as an inexpensive method to spread information.

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