

Examining the network of local health departments and their information sources on Twitter

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NPHIC 2013 National Conference on Health Communication, Marketing, & Media

Local health departments are following more than 19 thousand accounts on Twitter. Government agencies and media outlets appear most often among the top followed accounts, while 2 professional organizations are among the top 10 followed. Fourteen CDC Twitter accounts are among the top followed, as are 12 local health departments.

Research goal

The aim of this study was to understand the information sources local health departments access through their Twitter accounts.

Background

- Implementing evidence-based public health programs results in a greater likelihood of success for local health departments (LHDs) and is among the recently-developed LHD accreditation standards
- A recent study found that LHD leaders use a variety of information sources when they are making decisions related to programming; one of the sources reported by a small number of LHD leaders was social media
- Social media are emerging as popular channels for health information-seeking and information-sharing
- Twitter is a free social media application for microblogging, or brief, direct communication with a large audience at little to no cost
- As of spring 2012, 217 local health departments in the US had adopted Twitter

Data collection and coding

Collected Twitter users being followed by 217 LHDs using Twitter (n=19,494) using NodeXL

Identified all Twitter users (n=116) being followed by more than 10% of LHDs

Grouped 116 users into five categories:

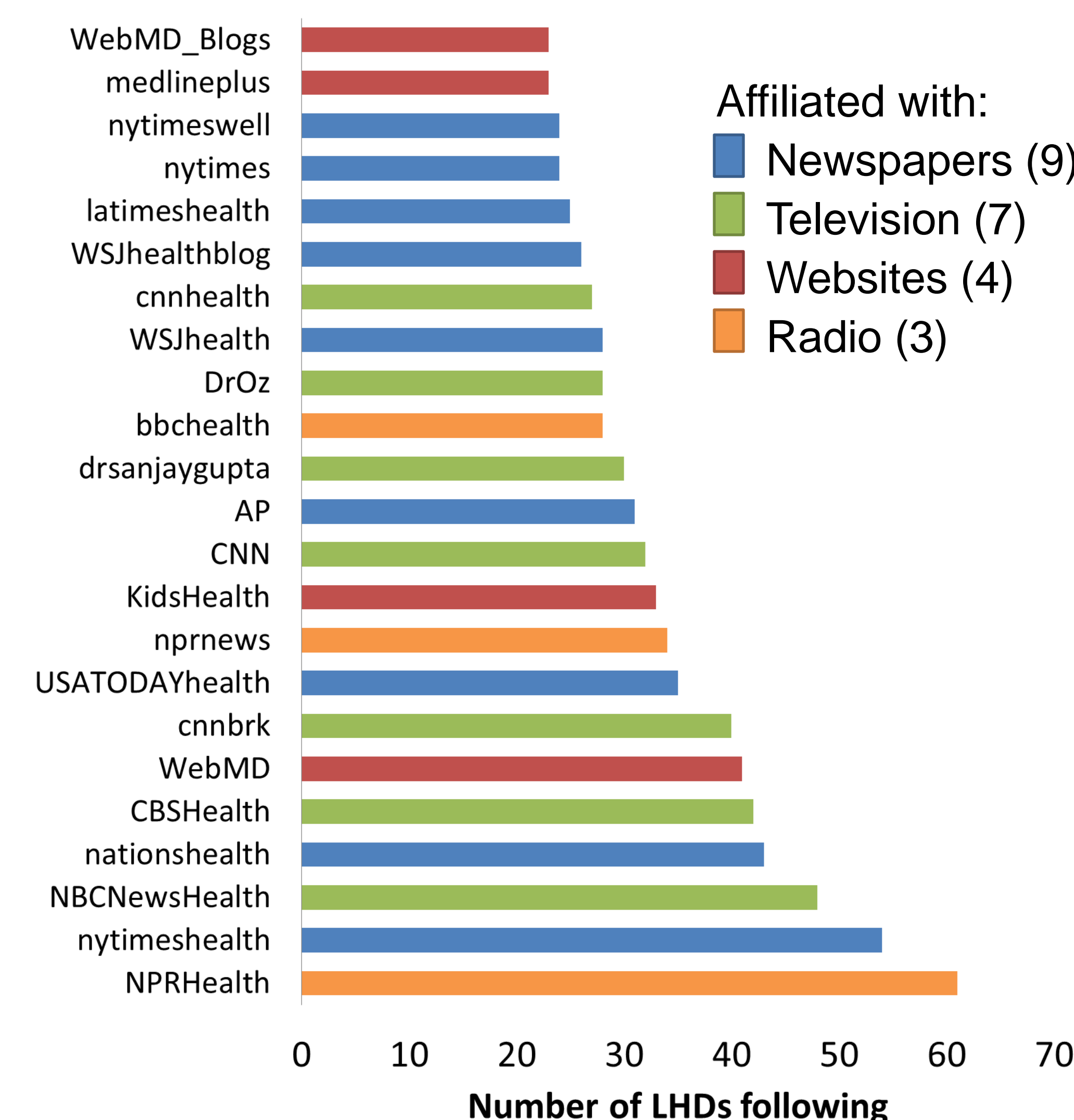
- Government (n=64)
- Media (n=23)
- Non-profit (n=18)
- Professional associations (n=5)
- Educational institutions (n=5)
- For-profit (n=1)

Information sources for LHDs on Twitter

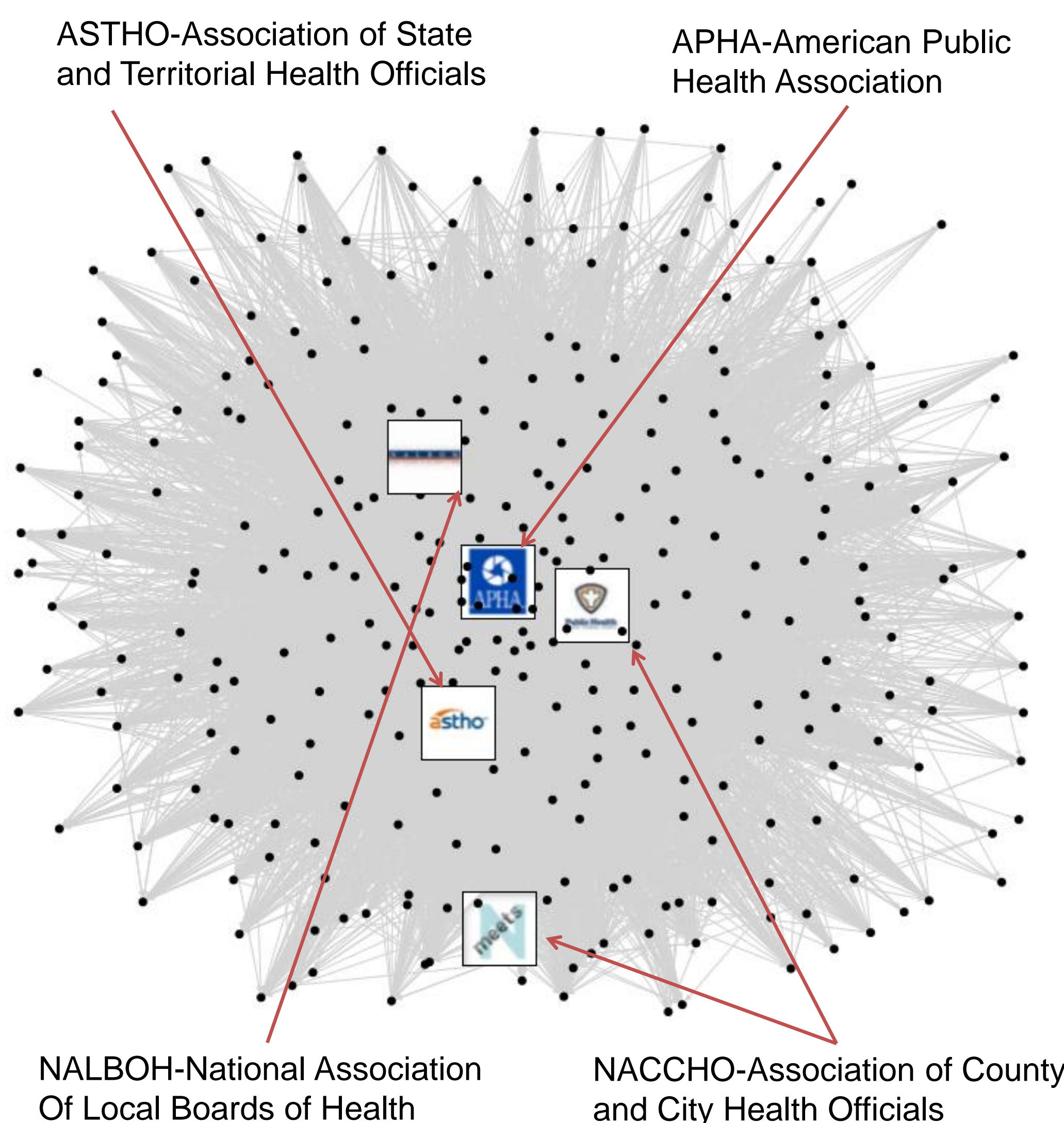
Top 10 most commonly followed information sources for LHDs

Twitter user	Description	Type	LHDs following
CDCemergency	CDC Emergency Preparedness and Response: increasing the nation's ability to prepare for and respond to public health emergencies.	Government	165
CDCFlu	Flu-related updates from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. Comments received are subject to PRA & may be archived http://go.usa.gov/8Ea .	Government	145
PublicHealth	Official account of the American Public Health Association. More: @getready @nationshealth @nphw @APHAAnnualMtg @AMJPublicHealth @StopDropOut	Professional	128
CDC_eHealth	CDC social media, including: videos, eCards, widgets, Twitter chats. Comments received are subject to PRA & may be archived http://go.usa.gov/8Ea .	Government	121
NACCHOalerts	National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is the national organization representing local health departments.	Professional	112
CDCgov	@CDCgov is official Twitter source for daily credible health & safety updates f/ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. Privacy policy http://go.usa.gov/8Ea	Government	111
FDARECALLS	Get notified about the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's recalls. Privacy Policy - http://www.fda.gov/privacy	Government	103
HHSgov	News and info from U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services	Government	103

Media sources commonly followed by local health departments on Twitter:

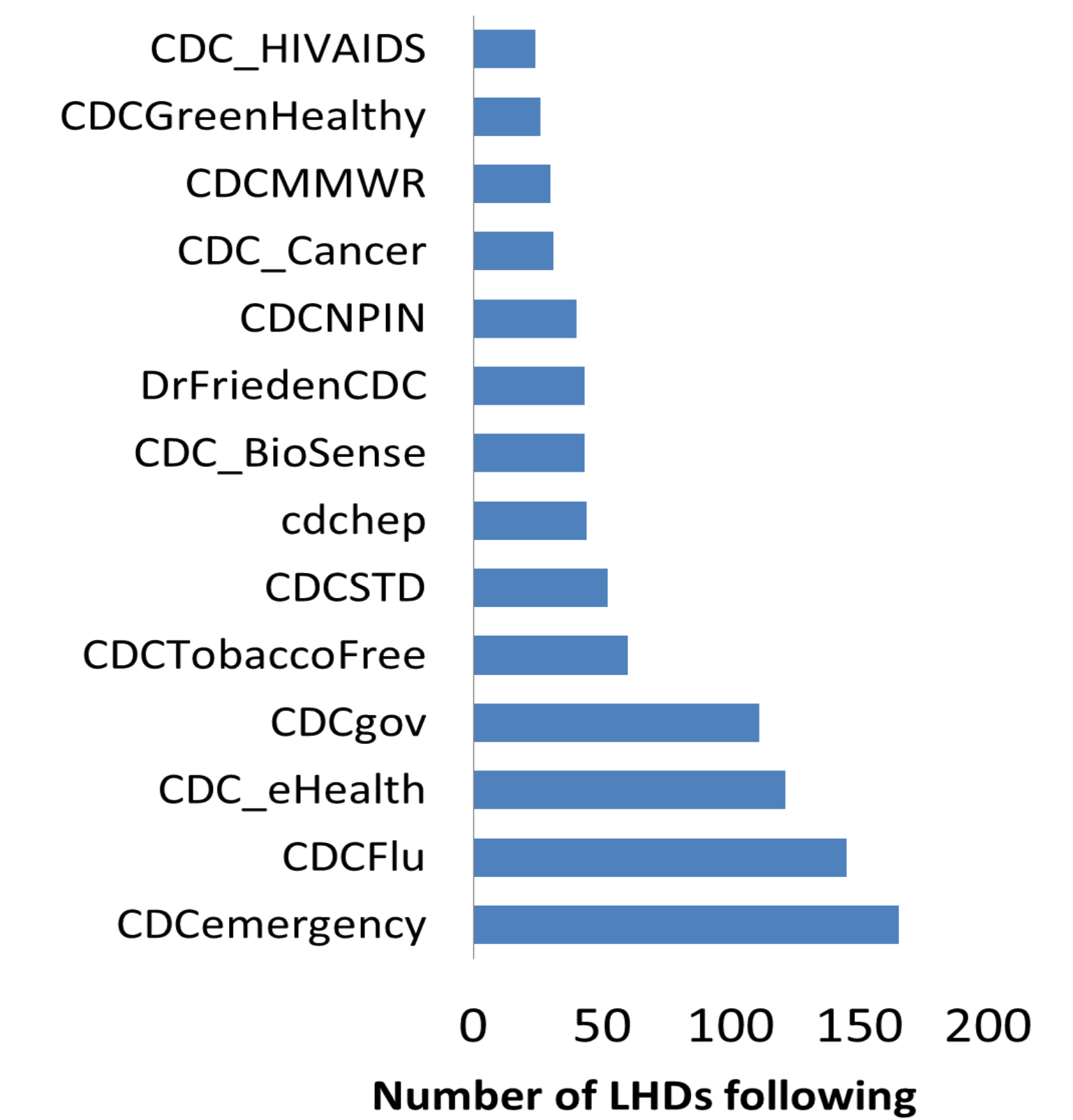


Professional organizations commonly followed by local health departments:



Local health departments follow 64 government sources, including 14 CDC accounts and 12 LHDs:

- Local health departments followed by the most peers:
- 36 follow HamCoHealth in Cincinnati, Ohio
 - 35 follow Lapublichealth in Los Angeles, California
 - 32 follow LakeCoHealth north of Chicago, Illinois
 - 32 follow nycHealthy in New York, New York
 - 31 follow SacPublicHealth in Sacramento, California
 - 25 follow CookCoHealth in the Chicago area
 - 25 follow HealthyBoston in Boston, Massachusetts
 - 25 follow KaneCoHealth in Aurora, Illinois
 - 24 follow MedinaHealth in Medina, Ohio
 - 22 follow Boonecohealth in Belvidere, Illinois
 - 22 follow JeffcoPH in Golden, Colorado
 - 22 follow McHenryCoHealth in Woodstock, Illinois



Conclusions & recommendations

- There were more government and media outlets among the common information sources
- 12 LHDs are among the government sources, suggesting the possibility of a network of LHDs exchanging information on social media
- The CDC Twitter feeds were prominent and several were followed by more than 100 LHDs
- National Public Radio's health Twitter account had the most followers of any media source
 - All three radio sources were public (2 NPR; 1 BBC)
- Government and professional organizations were the 10 most followed
- Future studies may wish to examine the content of followed Twitter feeds to determine what sort of information LHDs are gaining from these sources
- Public health journals are a major source of information on effective public health programming, and, despite many public health journals offering social media feeds, not a single journal was among the top information sources for LHDs

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This work was supported through a mentored research scientist development award from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.