

The Fear Factor: Dealing with Risk Communication between Alarmist Headlines and Confident Declarations

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International School of Scientific Journalism and Communication

2nd Course: Frontier Science for Health



Ettore Majorana Center for Scientific Culture, Erice

May 9th, 2010

The original meaning of Scare Mongering and Fear Mongering

Main Entry: **fear·mon·ger** 
Pronunciation: \fir·məŋ·gər, -məŋ-\
Function: *noun*
Date: 1939
: [SCAREMONGER](#)
— **fear·mon·ger·ing**  \-g(ə-)rɪŋ\ *noun*



Main Entry: **scare·mon·ger** 
Pronunciation: \-məŋ·gər, -məŋ-\
Function: *noun*
Date: 1888
: one inclined to raise or excite alarms especially needlessly
— **scare·mon·ger·ing**  \-g(ə-)rɪŋ\ *noun*

«... especially needlessly»

A possible rationale for fearmongering...



1. fearmonger

52 up, 9 down



buy fearmonger mugs, tshirts and magnets

One who spreads the ideology of fear through propaganda to fulfill a concealed agenda. Similar to a terrorist, but it fights with information and not direct violence. Politicians, media personas, and internet posters can all be fearmongers.

George W. Bush is accused for being a fearmonger for the use of scare tactics during the 2004 election.

Fear can be instilled, and used, for specific goals...

... to sell and deliver drugs, exams or procedures...

Disease mongering

[...] The practice of widening the diagnostic boundaries of illnesses, and promoting public awareness of such, in order to expand the markets for those who sell and deliver treatments, which may include pharmaceutical companies, physicians, and other professional or consumer organizations.

Wiktionary
['wɪkʃənɹɪ] *n.*,
a wiki-based Open
Content dictionary

... but also to oppose the practice...

Pharmageddon

*(Etymology: Blend of **Pharmaceutical** and **Armageddon**; dates from the late 1990s)*

A dystopian scenario wherein **medicine and the pharmaceuticals industry have a net detrimental effect on human health and medical progress does more harm than good**

Wiktionary
[ˈwɪkʃənɹɪ] n.,
a wiki-based Open
Content dictionary

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... until the marketing “steals” and distorts the concept

The poster features a dark, apocalyptic background with a large, white, distressed font for the title 'PHARMAGEDDON 2012'. Below the title, the words 'TICK. TOCK.' are written in a similar style. A large digital clock in the center shows '962:59:45:39' with labels 'days', 'hrs', 'min', and 'sec' underneath. To the left of the clock is a red navigation bar with the words 'ABOUT', 'VIDEOS', and 'DOWNLOADS'. To the right is another red bar with the word 'STORE' and social media icons for Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. At the bottom, white text reads: 'By 2012, the pharmaceutical industry will experience the biggest shift in product marketing history. No one is prepared. It's going to be pharmageddon.'

PHARMAGEDDON 2012

TICK. TOCK.

962:59:45:39
days hrs min sec

ABOUT VIDEOS DOWNLOADS

STORE

By 2012, the pharmaceutical industry will experience the biggest shift in product marketing history.
No one is prepared.
It's going to be pharmageddon.

THE ZOMBIE SALES REPRESENTATIVE



Drug marketing is exploring new ways...

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Between alarmist headlines and confident declarations

Rosiglitazone: seeking a balanced perspective

Editorial

"Health alert over diabetes drug linked to heart risks", ran the headline in one UK newspaper.

The occasion for this sudden anxiety was a systematic review of 42 trials published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by Steven Nissen and Kathy Wolski from the Cleveland Clinic. They reported an odds ratio of 1.43 (95% CI 1.03-1.98) for myocardial infarction (MI) in those taking rosiglitazone compared with controls. The

The tone of the *NEJM* paper was one of urgency. In an accompanying editorial, Bruce Psaty and Curt Furberg went further and questioned the whole rationale for prescribing rosiglitazone. GSK has responded by saying that it "strongly disagrees" with the conclusions of the *NEJM* paper. Who is right?

www.thelancet.com Vol 369 June 2, 2007

To avoid unnecessary panic among patients, a calmer and more considered approach to the safety of rosiglitazone is needed. Alarmist headlines and confident declarations help nobody. ■ *The Lancet*

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Maybe a well-deserved alarm, after all...

"Health alert over diabetes drug linked to heart risks",
ran the headline in one UK newspaper.!

Bloomberg.com

Aug 19, 2009

Avandia was the best-selling drug for diabetes in the world when it was linked to heart attacks in a 2007 study, sending **sales** down 63 percent from a peak of 1.4 billion pounds (\$2.3 billion) in 2006

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The challenges for science journalists



Cristine Russell is a senior fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and president of the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing.

EDITORIAL

Science Journalism Goes Global

WHEN SWINE FLU STRUCK SWIFTLY IN MEXICO, IT CREATED A CHALLENGE NOT ONLY FOR international public health officials but also for journalists around the world assigned to follow the unfolding story. They needed to explain, in the face of great uncertainty and a nonstop news cycle, what the novel influenza A (H1N1) virus was and the potential dangers it posed. It was a difficult story handled most capably by experienced health and science reporters.

Swine flu is the latest in a string of important global stories across the spectrum of science: stem cell research, the human genome, climate change, new energy technologies, evolution, space exploration, and HIV/AIDS, to name a few.

In the face of this changing media landscape, journalism and science organizations need to explore better ways to train reporters, scientists, and other communicators around the world in the substance and process of science writing. In doing so, it is crucial that the old-fashioned virtues of good journalism—accurate information, multiple sources, context over controversy, and editorial independence—not be lost in the enthusiasm for communicating content in novel ways.

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www.sciencemag.org **SCIENCE** VOL 324 19 JUNE 2009

Cheerleader or watchdog?

Science journalism is under threat. What can scientists do to help?

What should any researcher expect from a journalist beyond the keen intelligence needed to see the newsworthiness of the researcher's work, and the ability to spell his or her name correctly?

For some scientists, the answer is probably 'Not much.' Many tend to think of science journalism as a kind of public-relations service, existing purely to explain new scientific findings to the masses. They

And a minority, moving beyond perceived self-interest, will point to the deeper value of journalism, which is to cast a fair but sceptical eye over everything in the public sphere — science included.

Looking farther down the road, the scientific community should work with journalism schools and professional societies to ensure that journalism programmes include some grounding in what science is, and how the process of experiment, review and publication actually works.

The role of the media

```
graph TD; research[research] --> media[media]; media --> public[public]; public --> media; media --> decision-makers[decision-makers<br/>(politicians, funders, etc)]; decision-makers --> research;
```

The diagram illustrates the flow of information and influence between four entities: research, media, public, and decision-makers. Research leads to media, which then influences both the public and decision-makers. The public also influences media, and decision-makers influence research.

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Logan, Can. J Policy Research, 2000
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OBSERVATIONS

Can the health stories in the lay press maintain integrity when they are competing for attention with the antics of international celebrities? **Rebecca Coombes** reports from a conference

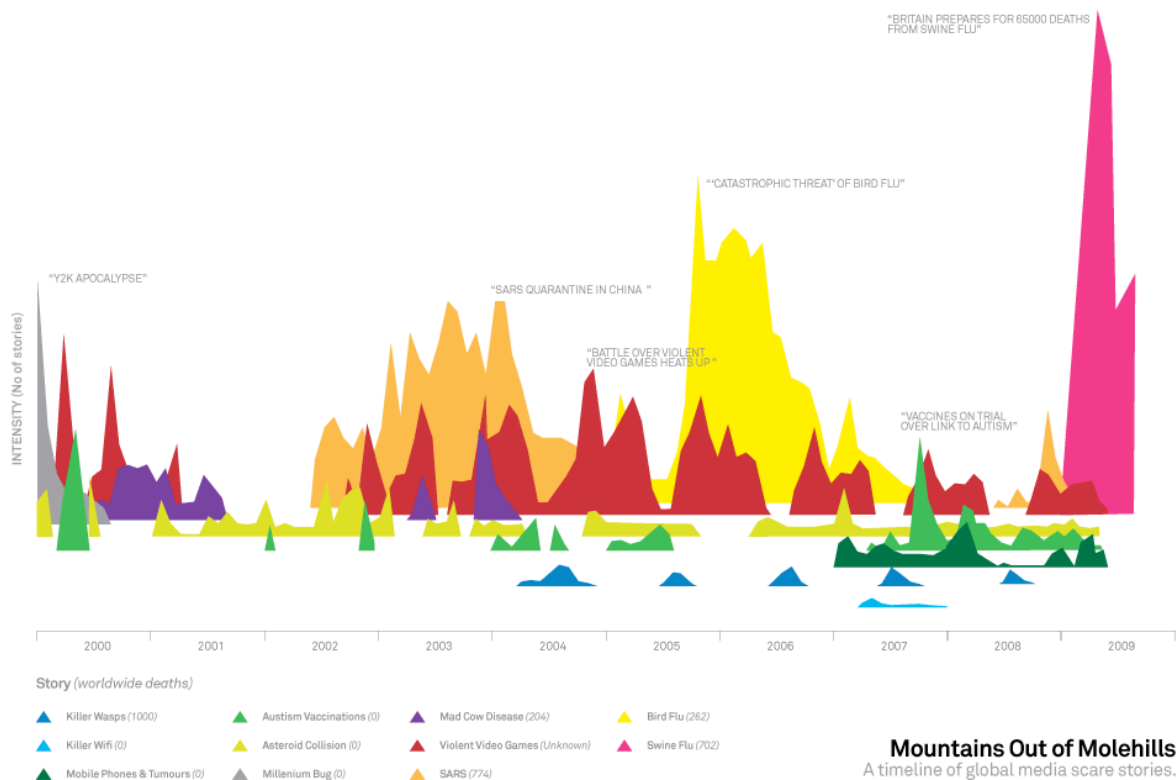
Stories by health journalists have to compete for readers' attention among reams of lifestyle and celebrity coverage

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The «perceived sins» of the media...



The «perceived sins» of the media...



... and the little-known merits of investigative science journalism

TIMES ONLINE

February 8, 2009

MMR doctor Andrew Wakefield fixed data on autism

Brian Deer

This article is subject to an on-going Press Complaints Commission complaint

THE doctor who sparked the scare over the safety of the MMR vaccine for children changed and misreported results in his research, creating the appearance of a possible link with autism, a Sunday Times investigation has found.

Confidential medical documents and interviews with witnesses have established that Andrew Wakefield manipulated patients' data, which triggered fears that the MMR triple vaccine to protect against measles, mumps and rubella was linked to the condition.

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... and of good old journalistic scrutiny

THE NUMBERS GUY | SEPTEMBER 9, 2009

Medicine's Dangerous Guessing Game

Different Methods of Weighing the Risks and Benefits of Medical Treatments Lead to Varying Conclusions About Their Safety

Thursday, September 10, 2009

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Simply put, the issue is a matter of whether to adjust for time. In other words, should the chances of contracting a harmful side effect be calculated by figuring out the simple percentage of all those taking the drug who have come down with the side effect? Or should those calculations be adjusted for the duration that patients have been treated?

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... and of good old journalistic scrutiny

THE NUMBERS GUY | SEPTEMBER 9, 2009

Thursday, September 10, 2009

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Medicine's Dangerous Guessing Game

Mixed Medical Messages

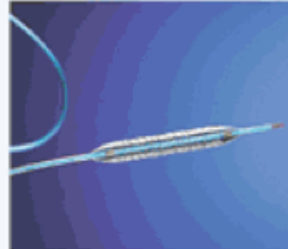
There is more than one way to measure risk. One approach is to calculate the overall percentage of people affected. For example, how many people developed complications or died in a particular study.

But medical studies and actuaries typically use another method. They examine the rate of people affected as time passes. These two methods might produce very different results.

Tysabri, multiple sclerosis drug



Medicated heart stent



Chemotherapy



Measurement

Risk of brain infection

Increase in delayed blood clots

Decrease in lung cancer deaths

Overall percentage of people affected

0.02%

0%

0%*

Rate over treatment periods

0.08%
OVER FIRST 3 YEARS

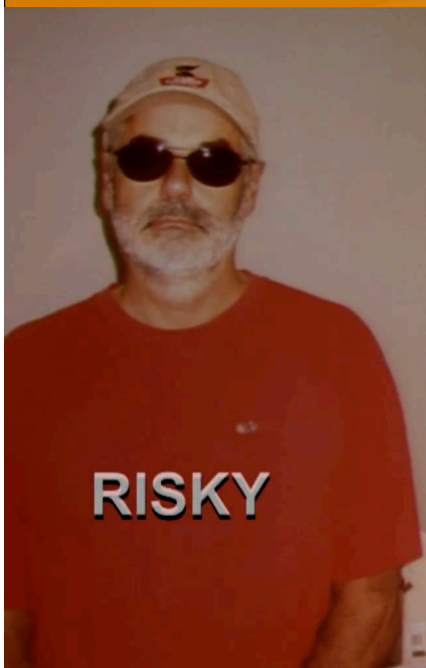
0.05%
PER YEAR

31%
PER YEAR

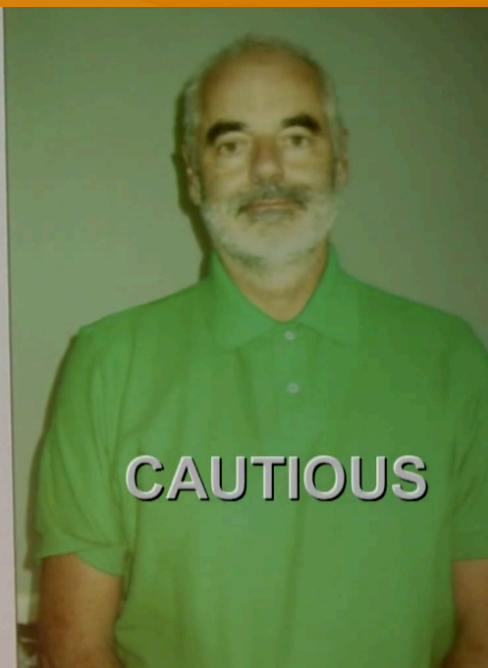
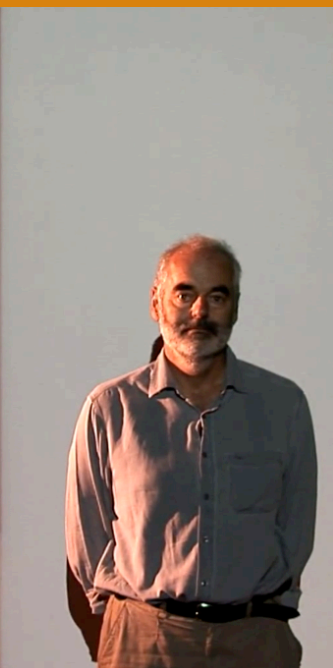
Sources: New England Journal of Medicine; Boston Scientific Corp.; Johnson & Johnson
Photos: Bloomberg News (Tysabri); Associated Press (stent); Getty Images (chemotherapy)

*After eight years

«Professor Risk», David Spiegelhalter, likes to play that game



RISKY



CAUTIOUS

«Professor of risk encouragement...»

**How are journalists
supposed find the right balance
to convey all this?**

The EBM researcher's perspective on science reports (1993)

1. Is it clear to whom the information in the report applies (i.e. to which population the evidence is applicable)?
2. Are facts clearly distinguished from opinions?
3. Is the assessment of the credibility (validity) of the evidence clear and well-founded (not misleading)?
4. Is the strength or magnitude of the findings (effects, risks or costs) that are the main focus of the article clearly reported?
5. Is there a clear and well-founded (not misleading) assessment of the precision of any estimates that are reported or of the probability that any of the reported findings might be due to chance?
6. Is the consistency of the evidence (between studies) considered and is the assessment well-founded (not misleading)?
7. Are all of the important consequences (benefits, risks and costs) of concern relative to the central topic of the report identified?
8. Based on your answers to the above questions, how would you rate the overall scientific quality of the report?

... and the perspective of a team of journalists and clinicians (2007)

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Grades for Health News Reporting

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Arthritis creams are probably better than goat tears
Los Angeles Times
October 5, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

A healthy skeptic perspective on arthritis pain creams, emphasizing, for the most part, "there's no good evidence that any over-the-counter rub or cream offers real relief" according to one source....

Little-known chiropractic treatment saves man's life
Des Moines Register
September 23, 2009
Rating: 0 stars

A world first: AIDS vaccine cuts the risk of HIV infection by 31 percent in large Thai study
Associated Press
September 24, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

Using an appropriately cautious tone, this story effectively informs the reader of the results of the first successful AIDS vaccination trial....

To Inspect the Heart, Some Doctors Now Start at the Wrist
The Washington Post
September 22, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

An engaging and important enterprise story that highlights

FIVE STAR STORIES

Scientists Puzzle Over Minor Success Of AIDS Vaccine
The Washington Post
September 25, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

While many other news organizations were calling an AIDS vaccine trial a breakthrough, this story provides caveats, skepticism, context, comparisons with other vaccines and historical perspective....

Roche Drug Shrinks Tumors in Study
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
September 3, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

This story reminds readers that its subject is a new drug in early

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

A PROJECT SUPPORTED BY
FOUNDATION FOR INFORMED MEDICAL DECISION MAKING

PUBLISHER'S NOTE



"It doesn't make sense for us to review TV health news anymore"

Professor Gary Schwitzer
Publisher, HealthNewsReview.org
University of Minnesota health journalism program

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Review Criteria for evaluating news stories

1. The **availability** of the treatment/test/product/procedure
2. Whether/how **costs** are mentioned in the story
3. If there is evidence of **disease mongering** in the story
4. Does the story seem to grasp the **quality of the evidence**?
5. How **harms** of the treatment/test/product/procedure are covered in the story
6. Does the story establish the **true novelty** of the approach?
7. How the **benefits** of the treatment/test/product/procedure are **framed**
8. Whether the story appeared to rely solely or largely on a **news release**
9. Is there an independent source and were any **possible conflicts of interests** of sources disclosed in the article?
10. Whether alternative treatment/test/product/procedure **options** are mentioned

Roche Drug Shrinks Tumors in Study

By RON WINSLOW

An experimental drug designed by Roche Holding AG's Genentech unit against a new cancer target yielded encouraging results against two rare tumors, researchers said, potentially opening up a new front in the battle against the disease.

In a small study, the drug, known as GDC-0449, shrank tumors in 18 of 33 patients, or 55%, with an advanced form of a skin cancer called basal cell carcinoma. In addition, the drug had a dramatic, though temporary, effect on a 26-year-old patient who had undergone multiple surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation in an unsuccessful battle against a brain cancer called medulloblastoma.

While the accounts involve just a handful of patients and the cancers are rare, researchers say the drug's target, called the hedgehog pathway, is believed to be involved in other, more common and hard-to-treat tumors, including colon, pancreatic and ovarian cancers. Merck & Co. and [Infinity Pharmaceuticals Inc.](#), Cambridge, Mass., are among other companies developing drugs against the hedgehog pathway. The pathway is so named because geneticists who discovered the gene that is associated with the pathway noticed it had tiny hairs sticking out in multiple directions.

"This defines a new pathway that may have efficacy for multiple tumor types," said Charles M. Rudin, associate director for clinical research at the Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center, and a co-author of two reports on the drug that are being published Thursday in the New England Journal of Medicine.

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OUR REVIEW

Roche Drug Shrinks Tumors in Study

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

September 3, 2009

Rating: ★★★★★

This story reminds readers that its subject is a new drug in early testing and its true efficacy is currently unknown. Defining "response" in this study and detailing harms would have helped. ...

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REVIEW SUMMARY

This story presents the early findings of a new drug shown to reduce tumor size in two rare cancers: advanced basal cell carcinoma and medulloblastoma. While the drug showed good response rates, the story reminds the reader that this is a new drug in the early stages of testing and its true efficacy is currently unknown. More information regarding what "response" really meant in this case, and more about the potential harms would have strengthened the piece.

<http://www.healthnewsreview.org/review/review.php?rid=2205>

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How Do US Journalists Cover Treatments, Tests, Products, and Procedures?

An Evaluation of 500 Stories

Gary Schwitzer

Summary Points

- The daily delivery of news stories about new treatments, tests, products, and procedures may have a profound—and perhaps harmful—impact on health care consumers.
- A US Web site project, HealthNewsReview.org (<http://HealthNewsReview.org/>), modeled after similar efforts in Australia and Canada, evaluates and grades health news coverage, notifying journalists of their grades.

- After almost two years and 500 stories, the project has found that journalists usually fail to discuss costs, the quality of the evidence, the existence of alternative options, and the absolute magnitude of potential benefits and harms.
- Reporters and writers have been receptive to the feedback; editors and managers must be reached if change is to occur.
- Time (to research stories), space (in publications and broadcasts), and training of journalists can provide solutions to many of the journalistic shortcomings identified by the project.



Speaking of «unbearable lightness»: the Italian Job

The Unbearable Lightness of Health Science Reporting: A Week Examining Italian Print Media

Luca Iaboli^{1,3}, Luana Caselli^{2,3}, Angelina Filice³, Gianpaolo Russi⁴, Eleonora Belletti⁵

¹ Department of Emergency Medicine, Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, Reggio Emilia, Italy, ² Department of Biomedical Sciences and Advanced Therapies, University of Ferrara, Ferrara, Italy, ³ Department of Nuclear Medicine, Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, Reggio Emilia, Italy, ⁴ Department of Transfusion Medicine, Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, Reggio Emilia, Italy, ⁵ Health Science Library, S. Anna Hospital, Ferrara, Italy


Conclusions/Significance: Consistent with prior research on health science communication in other countries, we report undisclosed costs and risks, emphasized benefits, unrevealed financial conflicts of interest and exaggerated claims in Italian print media. In addition, we show that the risk for a story about a new medical approach to be unbalanced is almost 9 times higher with respect to stories about any other kind of health science-related topics. These findings raise again the fundamental issue whether popular media is detrimental rather than useful to public health.

«The risk for a story to be unbalanced...»

«These findings raise again the fundamental issue whether popular media is detrimental rather than useful to public health».



Who «helps» journalists? - 1 Press Releases



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Who «helps» journalists? - 1 Press Releases

OPEN ACCESS Freely available online

PLOS one

Quality of Pharmaceutical Industry Press Releases Based on Original Research

Bindee Kuriya^{1*}, Elana C. Schneid², Chaim M. Bell³

Conclusions: Pharmaceutical company press releases frequently report basic study details. However, readers should be cautioned by the preliminary nature of the data and lack of identified limitations. Methods to improve the reporting and interpretation of drug company press releases are desirable to prevent misleading media coverage.

July 2008 | Volume 3 | Issue 7 | e2828

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Who «helps» journalists? - 1bis Disguised Press Releases



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Tue Sep 8, 2009 10:00am EDT

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Beike Biotech Adds International Executives to Strengthen Current Technologies and Develop Future Pipeline

SHENZHEN, China, Sept. 8 /PRNewswire-Asia/ -- Shenzhen Beike Biotechnology Co. Ltd. (<http://www.beikebiotech.com>), a leader in stem cell research and regenerative medicine, announced the appointment of two senior stem cell scientists to key positions in the company. Li Tao, Ph.D., joins as Lab

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Who «helps» journalists? - 3 Academia's PR offices



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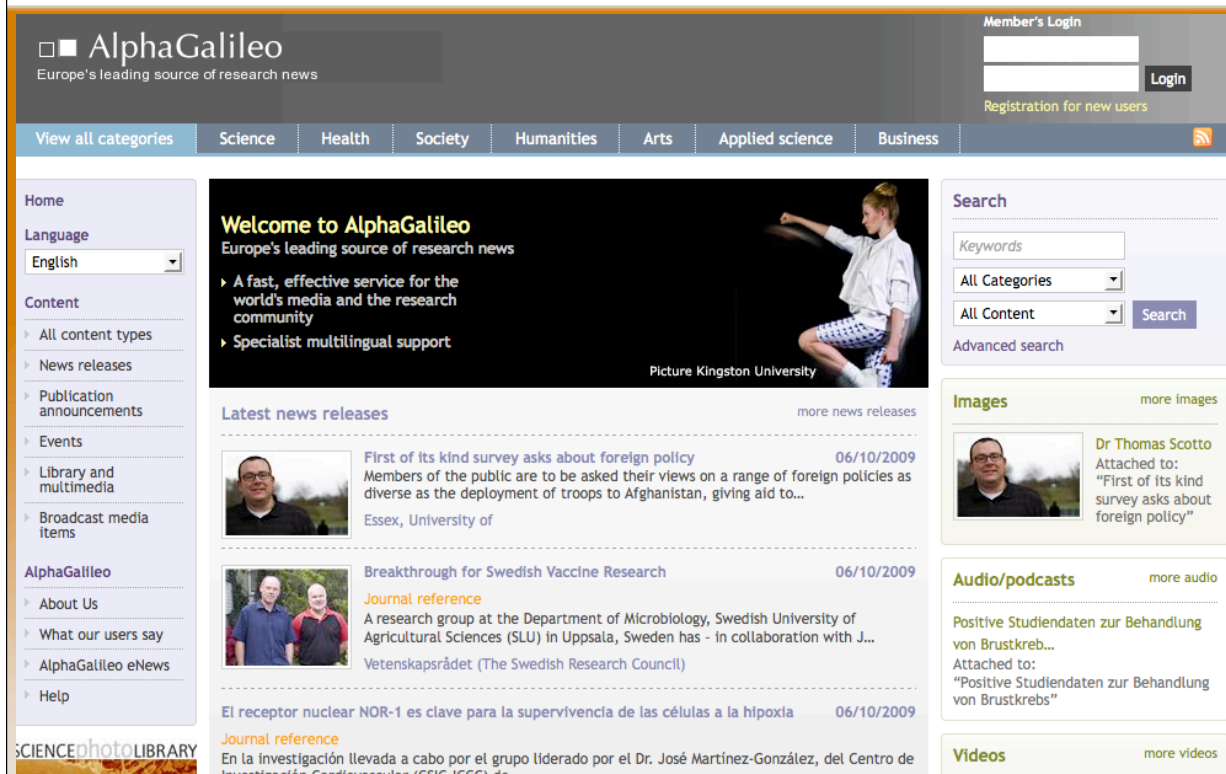
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Members of the public are to be asked their views on a range of foreign policies as diverse as the deployment of troops to Afghanistan, giving aid to...
Essex, University of

Breakthrough for Swedish Vaccine Research 06/10/2009
Journal reference
A research group at the Department of Microbiology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) in Uppsala, Sweden has - in collaboration with J...
Vetenskapsrådet (The Swedish Research Council)

El receptor nuclear NOR-1 es clave para la supervivencia de las células a la hipoxia 06/10/2009
Journal reference
En la investigación llevada a cabo por el grupo liderado por el Dr. José Martínez-González, del Centro de Investigación Cardiovascular (CSIC-ICCC) de...

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Dr Thomas Scotto
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Media Coverage of Scientific Meetings Too Much, Too Soon?

Lisa M. Schwartz, MD, MS

Steven Woloshin, MD, MS

Linda Baczek, BBA

"I'm pretty well plugged in to what's going on in research," he remarked. "I hear on the news 'Major breakthrough in cancer!' And I think, Gee, I haven't heard anything major recently. Then I listen to the broadcast and realize that I've never heard of this breakthrough. And then I never hear of it again."

Dr Richard Klausner, Former Director, National Cancer Institute¹

THE PRESS TRANSLATES MEDICAL research into news. How the press chooses stories to cover and how they present the findings are important, since the media can have a powerful influence on public perceptions. Research abstracts presented at scientific meetings often receive prominent media attention. It is easy to understand why. The general public has a strong desire to know about the latest developments in science and

Context Although they are preliminary and have undergone only limited peer review, research abstracts at scientific meetings may receive prominent attention in the news media. We sought to describe news coverage of abstracts, characterize the research, and determine subsequent full publication in the medical literature.

Methods We searched Lexis-Nexis to identify news stories printed in the 2 months following 5 scientific meetings held in 1998 (12th World AIDS Conference, American Heart Association, Society for Neuroscience, American Society of Clinical Oncology, and the Radiological Society of North America). We searched MEDLINE and contacted authors to determine subsequent publication in the medical literature within 3-3.5 years of the meetings.

Results A total of 252 news stories reported on 147 research abstracts (average, 50 per meeting); 16% of the covered abstracts were nonhuman studies, 24% randomized trials, and 59% observational studies. Twenty-one percent of the human studies were small (ie, involving <30 subjects). In the 3 years after the meetings, 50% of the abstracts were published in high-impact journals (based on Institute for Scientific Information ratings), 25% in low-impact journals, and 25% remained unpublished. The publication record of the 39 abstracts receiving front-page newspaper coverage was almost identical to the overall rate. Meeting organizers issued press releases for 43 abstracts; these were somewhat more likely to receive prominent news coverage (35% covered on front page vs 23%, $P=.14$), but were no more likely to be published.

Conclusions Abstracts at scientific meetings receive substantial attention in the high-profile media. A substantial number of the studies remain unpublished, precluding evaluation in the scientific community.

JAMA. 2002;287:2859-2863

www.jama.com

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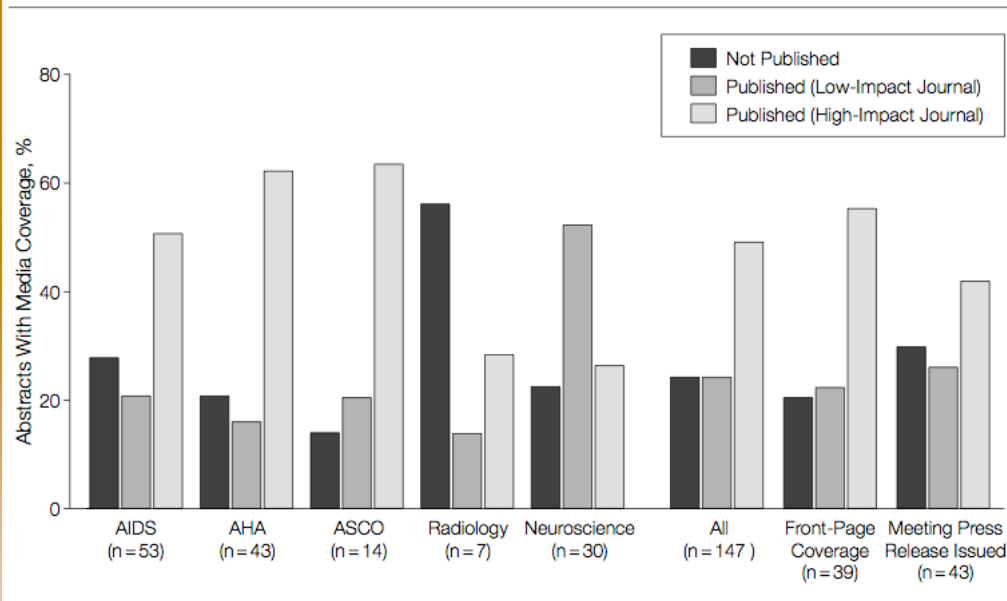
Who «helps» journalists? - 3 Academia's PR offices

Table 1. Description of Scientific Review Process for Submitted Abstracts and Publicity Process for the 5 Meetings*

Meeting	Scientific Review Process			Publicity Process
	Explicit Process	Abstracts Submitted	Accepted, %	
12th World AIDS Conference (June 1998; Geneva, Switzerland)	Yes	7000	90	28 Press releases of specific presentations Abstract book available to the media prior to the meeting Regular media briefings each day of the meeting Online news service with 24-hour updates
American Heart Association (November 1998; Dallas, Tex)	Yes	12 500	25	52 Press releases of specific presentations News department arranges for selected authors to hold press conferences during meeting
American Society of Clinical Oncology (May 1998; Los Angeles, Calif)	Yes	2400	40	25 Press releases of specific presentations Communications committee selects abstract for a news program distributed to journalists when they register for meeting 3-4 Media briefings and 1 "meet the expert" session held each day of the meeting
Radiological Society of North America (November 1998; Chicago, Ill)	Yes	7700	35	Topics for press coverage selected by the abstract reviewers for their scientific merit, outcomes, new research, or human interest 9 Press releases distributed to media and author interviews arranged at media request Committee chair chooses topic for press conferences during the meeting
Society for Neuroscience (November 1998; Los Angeles, Calif)	No	15 000	100	Public information officers select the 300 "most newsworthy" presentations; a committee then selects 12-18 for press release/conference, and more than 200 others for lay-language abstracts A book of the more than 200 lay-language summaries and 13 press conference news releases sent to the media 1 week before the meeting

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Figure. Profiles of Abstracts Receiving Media Coverage Within 3-3.5 Years



"High-impact journal" defined as a journal with top 10 impact factor ratings in the general medicine category, research and experimental medicine category, or the relevant specialty area (eg, oncology, neuroscience). Thus, low-impact journals did not appear on any of 3 top 10 lists. AIDS indicates 12th World AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) Conference; AHA, American Heart Association; ASCO, American Society of Clinical Oncology; Radiology, Radiological Society of North America; and Neuroscience, Society for Neuroscience.

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Annals of Internal Medicine

ARTICLE

Press Releases by Academic Medical Centers: Not So Academic?

Steven Woloshin, MD, MS; Lisa M. Schwartz, MD, MS; Samuel L. Casella, MPH; Abigail T. Kennedy, BA; and Robin J. Larson, MD, MPH

Background: The news media are often criticized for exaggerated coverage of weak science. Press releases, a source of information for many journalists, might be a source of those exaggerations.

Objective: To characterize research press releases from academic medical centers.

Design: Content analysis.

Setting: Press releases from 10 medical centers at each extreme of *U.S. News & World Report's* rankings for medical research.

Measurements: Press release quality.

Results: Academic medical centers issued a mean of 49 press releases annually. Among 200 randomly selected releases analyzed in detail, 87 (44%) promoted animal or laboratory research, of which 64 (74%) explicitly claimed relevance to human health. Among 95 releases about primary human research, 22 (23%) omit-

ted study size and 32 (34%) failed to quantify results. Among all 113 releases about human research, few (17%) promoted studies with the strongest designs (randomized trials or meta-analyses). Forty percent reported on the most limited human studies—those with uncontrolled interventions, small samples (<30 participants), surrogate primary outcomes, or unpublished data—yet 58% lacked the relevant cautions.

Limitation: The effects of press release quality on media coverage were not directly assessed.

Conclusion: Press releases from academic medical centers often promote research that has uncertain relevance to human health and do not provide key facts or acknowledge important limitations.

Primary Funding Source: National Cancer Institute.

Ann Intern Med. 2009;150:613-618.

For author affiliations, see end of text.

www.annals.org

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ARTICLE | Press Releases by Academic Medical Centers

5 May 2009 | *Annals of Internal Medicine* | Volume 150 • Number 9 | **613**

Context

News reports often exaggerate the importance of medical research.

Contribution

The researchers reviewed press releases issued by academic medical centers. They found that many press releases overstated the importance of study findings while underemphasizing cautions that limited the findings' clinical relevance.

Caution

The researchers did not attempt to see how the press releases influenced actual news stories.

Implication

Academic center press releases often promote research with uncertain clinical relevance without emphasizing important cautions or limitations.

—The Editors

0 Fear

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Who helps journalists? - 4 Academia and Institutions



The European Initiative for Communicators of Science

The European Initiative for Communicators of Science (EICOS) welcomes you at EICOS-ONline. EON is the virtual part of a programme that endeavors to improve the communication between journalists and scientists in the wider field of molecular biology and genetic engineering.

Apply for AHCJ-CDC Health Journalism Fellowships

The Association of Health Care Journalists has teamed up with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for this national fellowship program for journalists. Ten fellows are chosen to spend a week studying a variety of public health issues at two CDC campuses.

The AHCJ-CDC Health Journalism Fellows will:

- attend sessions on epidemiology, global disease prevention efforts, pandemic flu preparedness, climate change, vaccine safety, obesity, autism and more
- tour the CDC director's National Emergency Operations Center
- meet new sources on policy and research
- learn how to tap the agency's abundant resources to produce better stories

The competitive fellowships are open to professional journalists working in the United States. The fellowships include membership, travel, lodging and meals.



—exploring science, technology, medicine and the environment



2010 Neuroscience Boot Camp



AAAS Mass Media Science & Engineering Fellows Program

Increasing public understanding of science and technology is a principal goal of AAAS, so it only makes sense that it recognizes the need for scientists who are well versed in communicating complex ideas to a general audience. Enter the AAAS Mass Media Science & Engineering Fellows program, which has thrived in this endeavor for more than 30 years.

The 10-week summer program places graduate and post-graduate level science, engineering and mathematics students at media organizations nationwide. Fellows have worked as reporters, editors, researchers and production assistants at such media outlets as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, National Public Radio, *Sacramento Bee*, and *Scientific American*. Participants come in knowing the importance of translating their work for the public, but they leave with the tools and the know-how to accomplish this important goal.



one
Factor

Who helps journalists? - 5 Professional organizations



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The Center is classified as a supporting 501(c)(3) for AHCJ, Inc. The purpose of the Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism is to ensure that journalists are properly trained to cover news events, trends, and issues in all aspects of health care journalism, including the business of health care, public policy, medical research, medical practice, consumer health issues, public health, health law, and ethics.





World Federation of Science Journalists



EUSJA European Union of Science Journalists' Associations
www.eusja.org

Who helps journalists? - 6 Foundations

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Peer review within science journalism


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- Health & Medicine Stories



Health & Medicine Stories

< Previous Entries

Tricky issues in swine flu coverage—health workers and thimerosal

Tuesday, October 6th, 2009


Should we get the swine flu vaccine?

This is a critically important question, particularly if swine flu ripens into the epidemic that public health authorities are warning us about.

So we look for coverage that helps us answer that question. We find credible stories from many outlets, some of which has been [noted here earlier](#) by Charlie Petit. But there are other stories slipping into the news stream that raise concerns about reliability and accuracy.


Two themes caught my eye this morning: Stories about the dangers of vaccine preservatives; and others about health care workers refusing to take the vaccine.

In the first category, see a youtube video that pops up prominently in a Google search, and a Swine Flu Vaccine network based in



John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
www.knightfoundation.org

Fabio T



HEALTH NEWS REVIEW.ORG
Grades for Health News Reporting

LATEST STORY REVIEWS

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Arthritis creams are probably better than goat tears
Los Angeles Times
October 5, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

A healthy skeptic perspective on arthritis pain creams, emphasizing, for the most part, "there's no good evidence that any over-the-counter rub or cream offers real relief" according to one source....

Little-known chiropractic treatment saves man's life
Des Moines Register
September 23, 2009
Rating: 0 stars

FIVE STAR STORIES

A world first: AIDS vaccine cuts the risk of HIV infection by 31 percent in large Thai study
Associated Press
September 24, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

Using an appropriately cautious tone, this story effectively informs the reader of the results of the first successful AIDS vaccination trial....

To Inspect the Heart, Some Doctors Now Start at the Wrist
The Washington Post
September 22, 2009
Rating: ★★★★★

An engaging and important enterprise story that highlights

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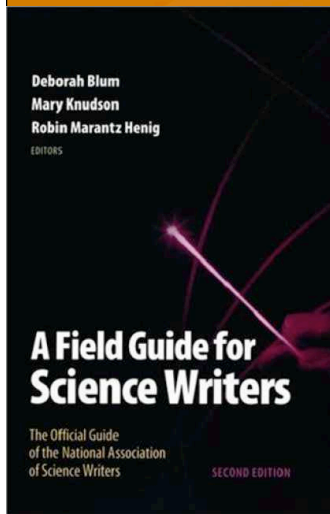
PUBLISHER'S NOTE

"It doesn't make sense for us to review TV health news anymore"

Professor Gary Schwitzer
Publisher, healthnewsreview.org
University of Minnesota health journalism program

Conclusion

Cristine Russell: «Risk Reporting»



«Ideally, science journalists could lead the way toward improved risk coverage that moves **beyond case-by-case alarms – and easy hype – to a more consistent, balanced approach** that puts the hazard du jour in broader perspective. [...]

«Unfortunately, both the sources of information – public or private – and the disseminators – the media – are unprepared to put the latest risk in context. **The 24-hour news cycle puts a premium on time, the news hole puts a premium on space, and competition puts a premium on controversy and conflict over more balanced risk information.** [...]

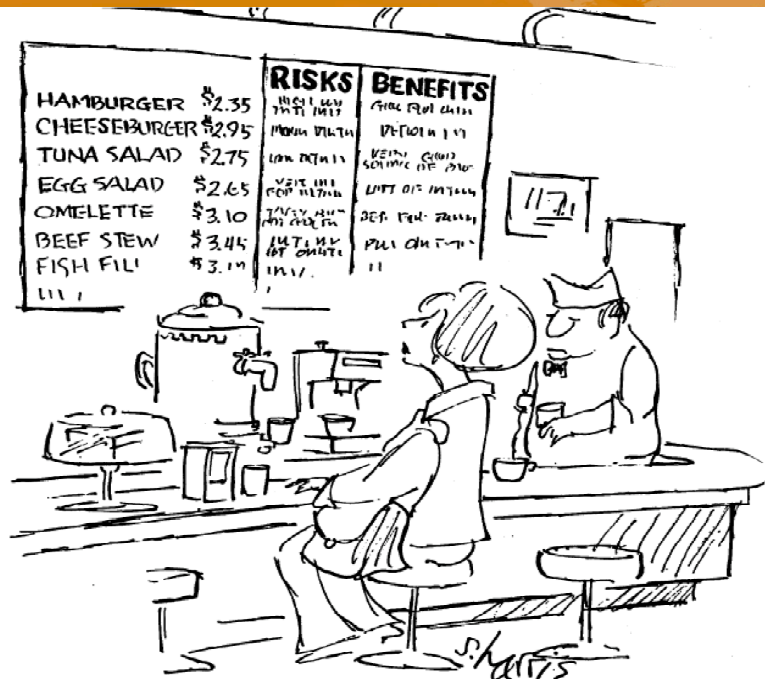
«In writing about scientific research and numbers, it is important to understand how strong the study is, the reputations of those who conducted it, and the **degree of uncertainty**».

A Field Guide for Science Writers. The Official Guide of The National Association of Science Writers, Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 2006 Fabio Turone - Erice 2010 Fear Factor

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Conclusion

- Risk and risk communication are **pervasive concepts** in our society



Factor

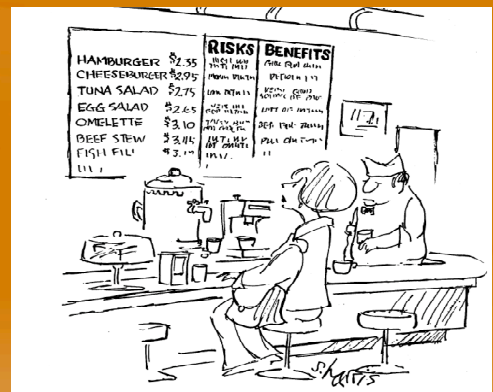
Conclusion

All actors involved should look for better ways to deal with risk, to help all the actors in society “**negotiate**” between each one’s **perceived risks** and **perceived benefits**, due to the experience with the long – and maybe never ending – quest for **informed consent in medicine**



Conclusion

- In order to do so, public institutions and individual scientists should try and cooperate on a regular basis with the members of the media and with professional organizations interested in the effort of building reciprocal trust and **disseminating a steady flow of good quality information**, focusing on the idea that in complex situations there is often no obvious decision one can take for all others.



Erice Statement 2009: communication, medicines and patient safety

- The media and professional communicators have an important role, not only as safety partners, but also in scrutinising the performance of drug safety systems.
 - New ways to cooperate with the media as professional equals must be explored to help in the provision of balanced, comprehensible, trustworthy and interesting safety information to the public on a regular basis, apart from specific announcements or reports of problems or crises.

The meeting was organized by the International School of Pharmacology at the Ettore Majorana Foundation and Centre for Scientific Culture in Erice, Sicily, Italy, in collaboration with the International Society of Pharmacovigilance (ISoP), SK Foundation and the Uppsala Monitoring Centre (UMC).

The participants were:

P. Bahri, UK; M. Bassi, Italy; A. Bourke, UK; A. Castot, France; A. Czarnecki, UK; D. Darko, Ghana; G. Deray, France; A. Dodoo, Ghana; B. D. Edwards, UK; I. R. Edwards, Sweden; B. Hugman, Thailand; H. Lelouet, France; M. Lindquist, Sweden; N. Moore, France; U. Moretti, Italy; D. Muzard, France; J. M. Ritter, UK; P. Rizzini, Italy; D. Szafir, France; T. Trenque, France; F. Turone, Italy; K. Van Grootheest, the Netherlands; G.P. Velo, Italy; M. Vergnano, Italy.

Fabio Turone - Erice Factor



-We'd need a vaccine against stupidity.

- How about side effects?

Thank you!

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