

«Trust me, and I will trust you»: an exercise of relativism

Fabio Turone
Science Writers in Italy
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Erice International School
of Science Journalism and Communication
Erice, August 3rd, 2012

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Portrait of a scientist (by a journalist)



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"If you want to know how the world wags, and
who's wagging it, here's your answer."—Bill Moyers

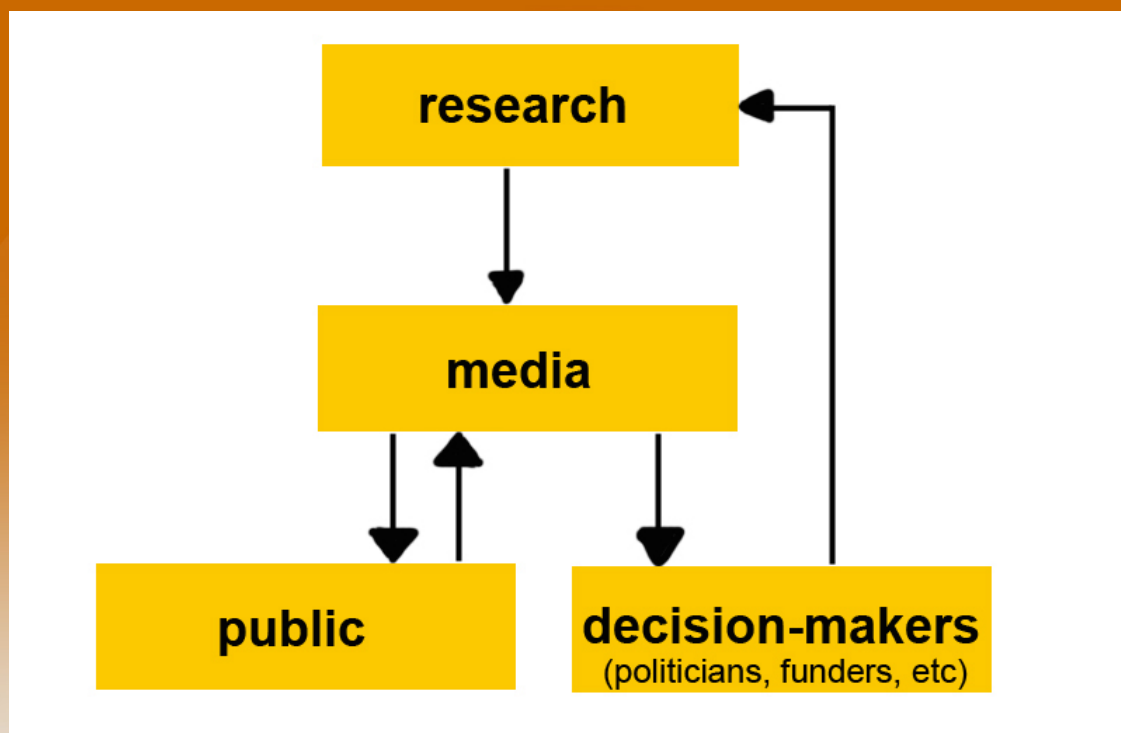
2

Portrait of a journalist (by a scientist)



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The role of the media



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Logan, Can J Policy Research, 2000

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.

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.

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Who helps journalists? - 1 Press Releases



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Speaking of quality - Press Releases

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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.

«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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One week «examining» the press...

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

Luca Iaboli^{1*}, Luana Caselli^{2*}, 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».

PLoS Medicine | www.plosmedicine.org

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March 2010 | Volume 5 | Issue 3 | e9829

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



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Beike Biotech Adds International Executives to Strengthen Current Technologies and...

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 Director of the iPS (induced Pluripotent Stem Cell) Laboratory, and Susan Jiang, M.D., Ph.D., has been named Chief Science Officer. Dr. Sean Hu, Ph.D., CEO and Chairman, will remain focused on furthering the company's research achievements while strengthening its position in the international biotechnology field.

Dr. Hu commented, "Beike has been at the forefront of stem cell technology

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Who helps journalists? - 2 Publishers' PR offices



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Tuesday 6 October 2009

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As you can see, it's had a much-needed makeover and the navigation has been redesigned to make it easier for you to find what you need. The basic way in which material is laid out is clearer.

Importantly, we have not changed the way in which our titles will now begin send most newsworthy material. You will need to update your

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VOL.478 NO.7369 DATED 20 OCTOBER 2011

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The NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL of MEDICINE

1180

THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE

Oct. 17, 1991

OCCASIONAL NOTES

IMPORTANCE OF THE LAY PRESS IN THE TRANSMISSION OF MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE TO THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

Abstract Background. Efficient, undistorted communication of the results of medical research is important to physicians, the scientific community, and the public. Information that first appears in the scientific literature is frequently retransmitted in the popular press. Does popular coverage of medical research in turn amplify the effects of that research on the scientific community?

Every medical researcher develops systematic and nonsystematic mechanisms for reducing and filtering what would otherwise be an overwhelming flow of scientific information. Our evidence suggests that a lay publication may serve as one of these filtering mechanisms, even for scientists. This effect seems to persist for at least 10 years after a *Journal* article appears. It is not certain whether other lay media (e.g., newsmagazines and broadcast news programs) also function as filters of information derived from medical research, and whether the use of such lay filters prompts some scientists to overemphasize certain medical articles and deemphasize others.

It appears that the direct transmission of information in the medical literature (i.e., the *Journal*) is enhanced or amplified by secondary transmission in the lay press (i.e., the *Times*). Further research would be required to determine whether the lay press not only amplifies but also distorts the transmission of medical information to the biomedical community.

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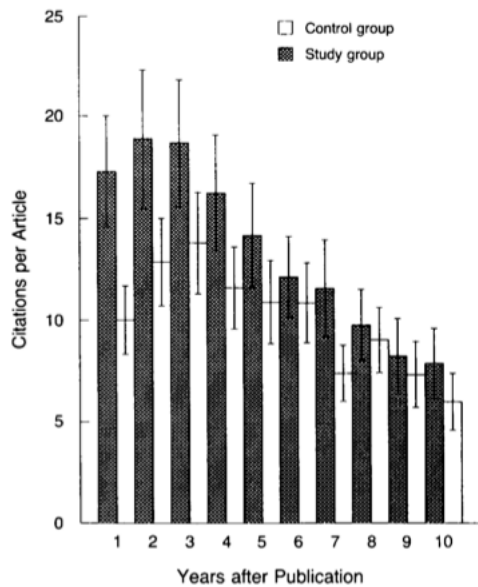


Figure 1. Mean (\pm SE) Number of Scientific Citations of 25 Journal Articles Covered by the *Times* (Study Group) and 33 Journal Articles Not Covered by the *Times* (Control Group). The articles were published in the *Journal* in 1979, and citations were tracked for the 10 years from 1980 to 1989.

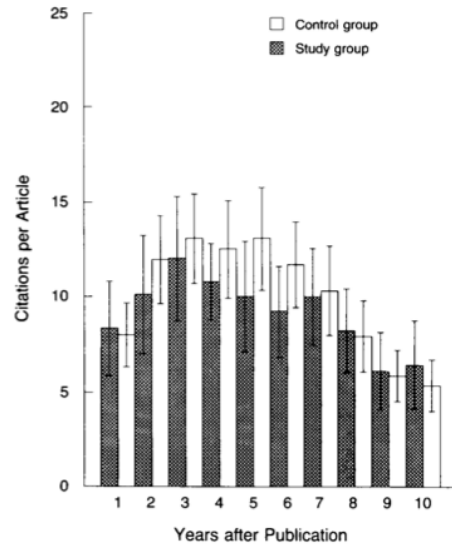


Figure 2. Mean (\pm SE) Number of Scientific Citations of 9 Journal Articles Covered by the *Times* during its Strike (Study Group) and 16 Journal Articles Not Covered by the *Times* during its Strike (Control Group). The articles were published in the *Journal* during the strike period (August 10, 1978, to November 5, 1978), and citations were tracked for the 10 years from 1979 to 1988.

Who helps journalists? 3 - Academia's PR offices

Who helps journalists? 3 - Academia's PR offices

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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)

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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

Media Coverage of Scientific Meetings

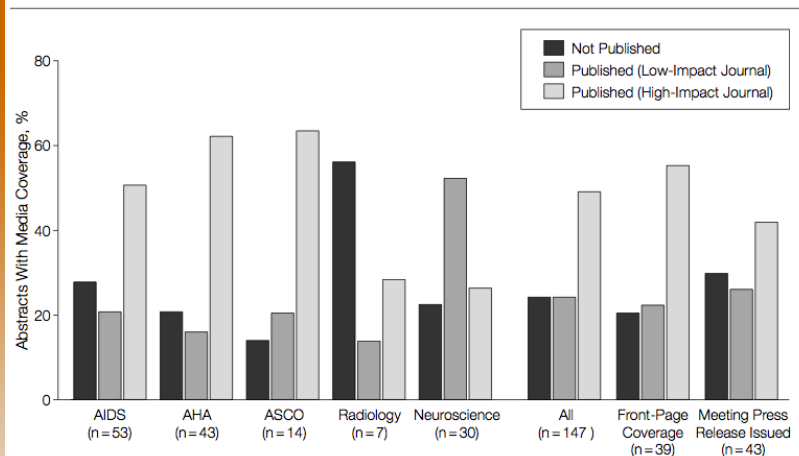
Too Much, Too Soon?

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

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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PLOS MEDICINE

Health in Action

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

An Evaluation of 500 Stories

May 2008 | Volume 5 | Issue 5 | e95

Gary Schwitzer

PLOS Medicine | www.plosmedicine.org

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.

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Who helps journalists? 4 - Academia and Institutions



The European Initiative for Communicators of Science

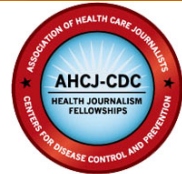
The European Initiative for Communicators of Science (EICOS) welcomes you at EICOS-ONline. EON is the virtual part of a programme that endeavors to improve the communication between journalists and scientists in the wider field of molecular biology and genetic engineering.

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



exploring science, technology, medicine and the environment



2010 Neuroscience Boot Camp

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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.



Who helps journalists? 5 - Professional organizations



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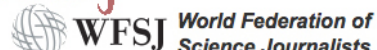
The Center is classified as a supporting 501(c)(3) for AHCJ, Inc. The purpose of the Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism is to ensure that journalists are properly trained to cover news events, trends, and issues in all aspects of health care journalism, including the business of health care,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



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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.

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.

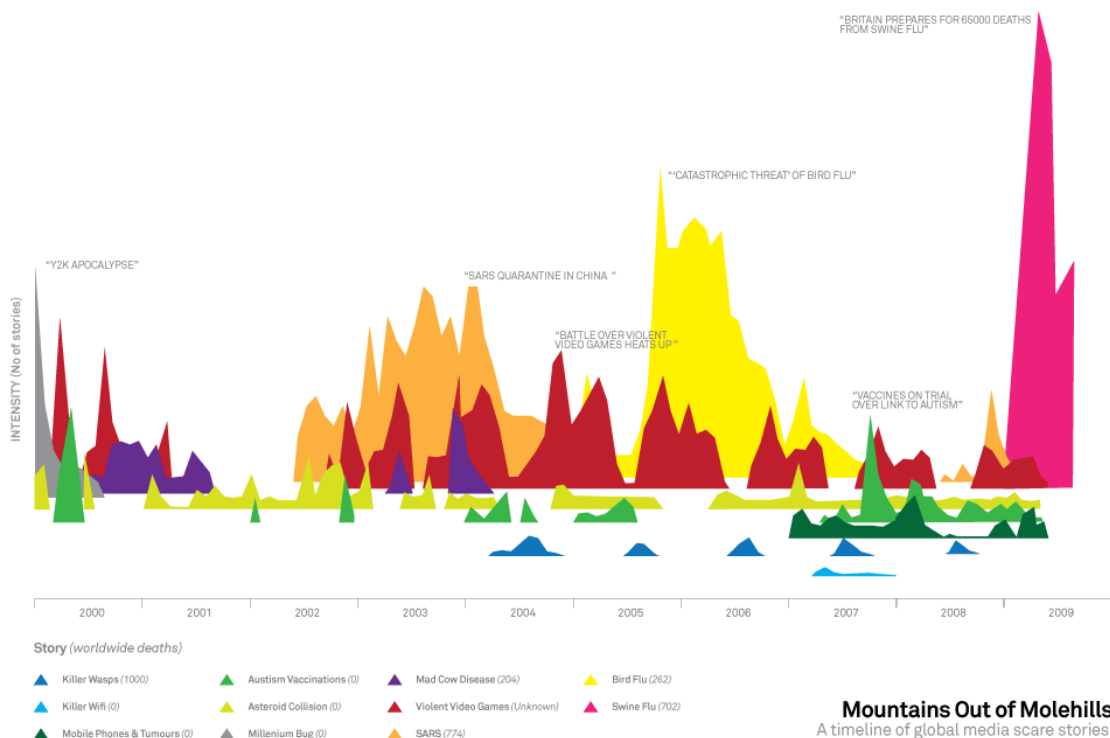
Swine flu is the latest in a string of important global stories across the spectrum of science: stem cell research, the human genome, climate change, new energy technologies, evolution, space exploration, and HIV/AIDS, to name a few.

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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Agency Zoe, Milan, Italy – Erice 2012

www.sciencemag.org SCIENCE VOL 324 19 JUNE 2009

The media's roller-coaster...



Mountains Out of Molehills
A timeline of global media scare stories.

Fabio Turone - Science Writers in Italy
Agency Zoe, Milan, Italy – Erice 2012

source: Google News Timeline

Two clicks away from Britney?

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

Any doctor who has ever snorted in derision at some less than accurate media health story would have enjoyed the spectacle last week of a group of newspaper journalists who turned out to answer for their trade's perceived sins at a national debate about standards in health reporting.



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

BMJ | 14 FEBRUARY 2009 | VOLUME 338

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Does the media support or sabotage health?

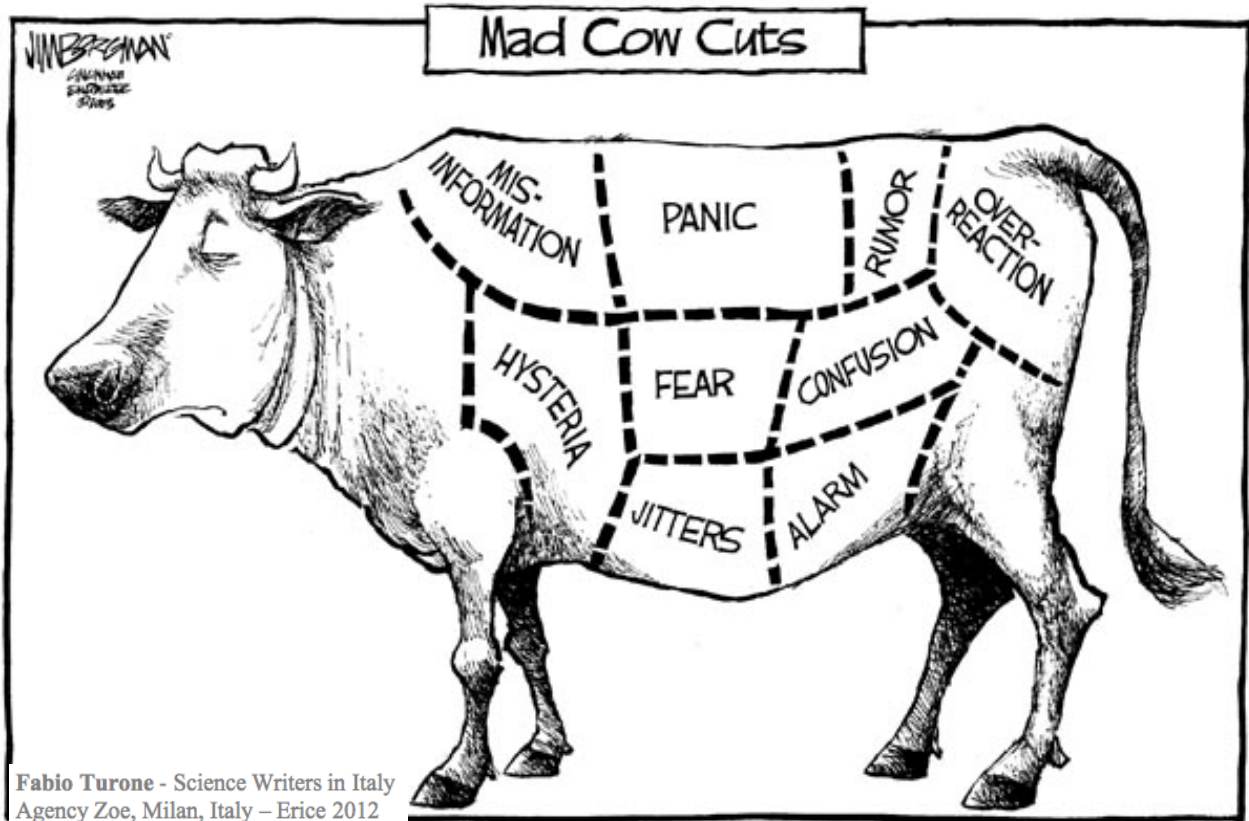
Editorial



Perhaps the health-care sector is guilty of painting a caricature of journalists as unscrupulous hacks and ill-informed pundits, rather than as objective communicators of health information and informers of public debate. However, the more responsible the press appear, the less the general public seem to like it. People do not seem to be interested in straight reporting of health issues; mainstream media need to maintain their audiences, and controversy sells.

THE LANCET

Controversy sells



Does the media support or sabotage health?

Editorial

The media are integral to getting people involved in their own health by promoting and highlighting health issues, and rolling public discourse will allow health topics to become central issues of democracy. However, the public need clear and accurate information. Responsible reporting should not only fall on the shoulders of reporters, but also on scientific publishers, scientists, and health-care workers who can promote evidence-based medicine in the media. For example, in the UK, scientists can use the Science Media Centre, which is committed to encouraging and supporting experts to become more effective at engaging with the media, to debunk the myths around big controversial stories that hit the headlines.

THE LANCET

2845 ways to spin the Risk

Posted February 23rd, 2009 by gmp26 in [level 1](#), [absolute-relative-risk](#), [clinical-trials](#), [Fun Stuff](#), [risk-communication](#), [statins](#)

In the animation below we show how risks can be 'spun' to look bigger or smaller, how medical treatments can be made to seem useless or to be wonder cures, and how lifestyle changes might look worthwhile or not worth bothering with. All by changing the words used, the way the numbers are expressed, and the particular graphics chosen.



Cambridge «Professor Risk»,
David Spiegelhalter,
likes to play the «spin game»

<http://understandinguncertainty.org/node/233>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1PtQ67urG4>

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Spinning the Risk Print Help Full Screen

What's the Risk? Personalise

Bacon sandwiches Back Next

Absolute
 Relative
 No. Needed to Treat
 Chance
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 Possible Futures
 Percentage
 Natural Frequencies
 out of 10
 out of 100
 out of 1000
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 Negative

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Harms of eating bacon

Your chance of experiencing bowel cancer without Bacon sandwiches is 1 in 10, which is increased to 1 in 10 with Bacon sandwiches.

experience anyway Blobs Tallies Faces
 harmed by Bacon sandwiches Random Smilies
 avoided anyway

nature

www.nature.com/nature

Vol 437 | Issue no. 7055 | 1 September 2005

Responding to uncertainty

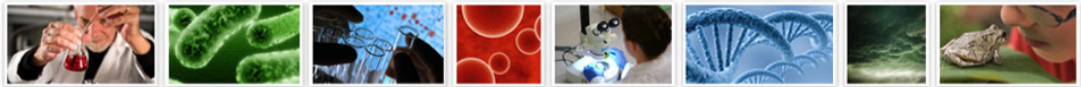
Such problems arise in any scientific country. The SMC has made a particular contribution to mitigating them in Britain. The brainchild of Susan Greenfield, the director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, which hosts it, its success can be credited above all to the robust leadership of its director Fiona Fox. It provides quotes from experts in immediate response to breaking stories, and in-depth briefings for longer-running controversies. It tutors scientists in communicating complexities such as risk with respectable but effective soundbites. In all of this it acts independently, on behalf of both journalists and scientists — but it ultimately serves the media. Other countries are

“The UK Science Media Centre provides quotes from experts in immediate response to breaking stories, and in-depth briefings for longer-running controversies.”

Fabio Turone - Science Writers in Italy
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Our aim is to promote accurate, bias-free reporting on science and technology by helping the media work more closely with the scientific community.



In the News

Speed camera needed for neutrinos?

Posted in [In the News](#) on September 23rd, 2011.

Physicists have said – [in a paper](#) and in a seminar at the European Center for Nuclear Research (CERN) – that subatomic particles known as neutrinos can break the the speed of light Albert Einstein held up as a cosmic speed limit 106 years ago.

1 tweet
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They said the neutrinos raced from a particle accelerator outside Geneva, where they were created, to a cavern underneath Gran Sasso in Italy, a distance of about 730km, about 60 nanoseconds faster than it would take a light beam. That tiny deviation of about 0.0025 percent (2.5 parts in a hundred thousand) could open up the theoretical possibility of time travel.



Physicist David Koschka, of Auckland University, said that if the research was

CERN researchers are now looking to the United States and Japan to confirm the results, perhaps through a similar neutrino experiment at Fermilab. Alvaro DeRejula, a theorist at CERN, called the claim "...flabbergasting: if it is true, then we truly haven't understood anything about anything," he said, adding: "It looks too big to be true. The correct attitude is to ask oneself what went wrong."

"...flabbergasting: if it is true, then we truly haven't understood anything about anything," he said, adding: "It looks too big to be true. The correct attitude is to ask oneself what went wrong."

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re. the following commentary from physicists:

SMC BLOG

Latest post

Veteran science journalist joins the SMC

Journalists covering science-related stories now have an extra resource to draw on with former NZPA reporter Kent Atkinson joining the team at the Science Media Centre. Atkinson ranks among the country's most experienced reporters having spent 27 years at the New Zealand Press Association which shut its doors this week after 132 years of operation. [...]

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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2009;339:b4124

Observations

Medicine and the Media

Cervarix: definitely not the new MMR

Rebecca Coombes, associate editor, *BMJ*

We have known for more than a week that the Cervarix vaccine did not kill 14 year old Natalie Morton (*BMJ* 2009;339:b4032, doi:10.1136/bmj.b4032). But the sad death of the Coventry schoolgirl shortly after receiving the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine on 28 September presented a difficult test to the press in the United Kingdom.

The story had some of the hallmarks of the furore over the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine—a health scare also concerning a vaccine with a previously excellent safety record. Journalists had their fingers burnt over MMR, when they gave credence to the maverick doctor Andrew Wakefield and his later retracted evidence that the MMR vaccine might trigger autism. Perhaps wary of charges of gullibility, initial reports of Natalie Morton's death were restrained. "Don't panic" ran the *Daily Mirror* headline. Science friendly media agencies, such as the Science Media Centre, successfully fielded questions from the press and provided expert quotations.

«Science friendly media agencies, such as the Science Media Centre, successfully fielded questions from the press and provided expert quotations»

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Agency Zoe, Milan, Italy – Erice 2012

«The problem is stupidity» (R. Cingolani)



- We'd need a vaccine against stupidity.

- How about side effects?

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Letter to the Editors

Br J Clin Pharmacol / 69:2 / 207-208

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.

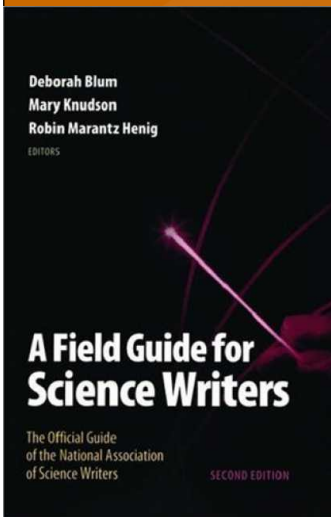
The meeting was organized by the International School of Pharmacology at the Ettore Majorana Foundation and Centre for Scientific Culture in Erice, Sicily, Italy, in collaboration with the International Society of Pharmacovigilance (ISO-P), SK Foundation and the Uppsala Monitoring Centre (UMC).

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. Doodoo, 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.

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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**».

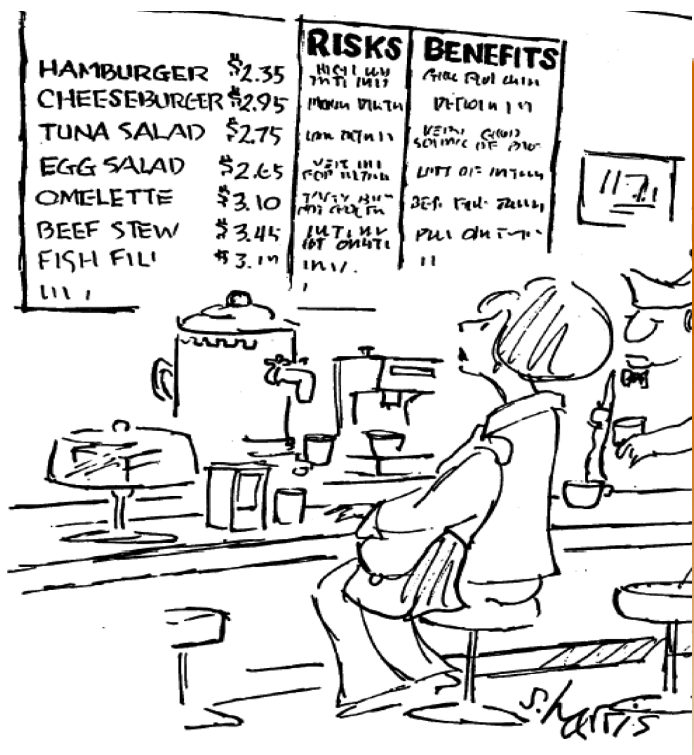
A Field Guide for Science Writers. The Official Guide of The National Association of Science Writers, Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 2006

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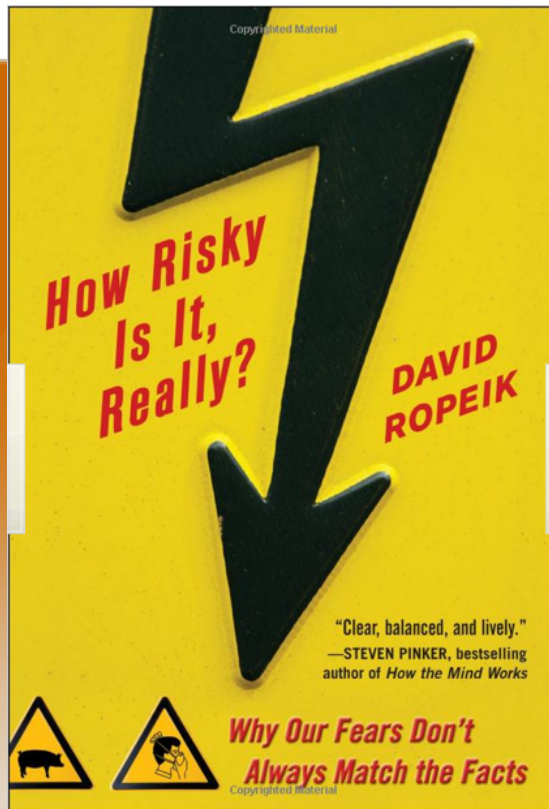
What's today's special?

Risk and risk communication are **pervasive** in our society.

Science writers dealing with risk should help all the actors in society **“negotiate”** between each one's **perceived risks and perceived benefits**, knowing that **in complex situations there is often no obvious decision one can take for all others.**



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«Humans tend to fear similar things, for similar reasons. These patterns are described by the study of risk perception, which, loosely defined, identifies the psychological factors by which we subconsciously 'decide' what to be afraid of and how afraid to be».

David Ropeik's list of factors influencing risk perception

1. TRUST
2. RISK V. BENEFIT
3. CONTROL
4. CHOICE
5. NATURAL or HUMAN-MADE
6. DREAD
7. CATASTROPHIC V. CHRONIC
8. UNCERTAINTY
9. ME vs. THEM
10. FAMILIAR or NEW
11. KIDS
12. PERSONIFICATION
13. FAIRNESS/MORALITY
14. AWARENESS

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David Ropeik's list of factors influencing risk perception

1 TRUST. The more we trust, the less afraid we'll be.
The less we trust, the greater our fears.

FOUR POTENTIAL SOURCES OF TRUST

- The communicators informing us about a risk.
- The organization that is supposed to protect us.
- The agency or company or institution creating the risk.
- The process deciding whether we will be exposed to a hazard.

KEYS TO BUILDING TO TRUST

(Faking any of these is DESTRUCTIVE!)

- Honesty. Openness.
- Sincere “dialogue”, beginning with respect for and validation of people's emotions.
- Competence.
- Sharing control.

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Science Journalism – Critical Questioning in the Public Sphere

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«Sir, there is
a nanoparticle
in my glass!»

Thank you.
turone@agenziazoe.it
www.twitter.com/fabioturone
www.sciencewriters.it

