



Who profits from balanced health reporting?

by Cathy Holding

The balanced reporting of science and health issues is a hot topic, and rightly so. A highly-charged place to view one side of the debate is in Ben Goldacre's column *Bad Science* in *The Guardian* newspaper and his related blog [1]. "If you're a journalist who misrepresents science for the sake of a headline ... then beware: your days are numbered," runs the column's strapline.

I'm not advocating misrepresenting science but you do need a good headline! When making a pitch, you have about thirty seconds to catch the news editor's eye if you are going to make the sell (for more on the difficulties of being a freelance science reporter, see my article in *TWS*, 'What makes science news?' [2]). The headline has to be something that will be important to Joe Public reading the news, and something the editor will feel is relevant to his readers. Then you need an angle—a hook on which to reel in the editor, let alone the readers. Whether it's writing ***News is all about the sell*** up the results of a clinical trial, or a research paper coming from an academic laboratory, for the news, the principle is entirely the same. This is the heart of the matter—it's all about the sell.

Selling stories runs at many different levels, from the top down. The editor needs a headline and an angle in his stories to sell his newspaper. Researchers need to publicise their work, and so they emphasise their best results to the press, ultimately with their eyes on more funding for future research. The institution in which the work was carried out needs headlines for its press releases and news pages, so hoping also to grab the attention of the press and ultimately to attract funding and high-calibre researchers. If it's a clinical trial, the pharmaceutical industry wants to present its latest drug in the best possible light so that it can sell it in a fiercely competitive market. Then add to this the fact that the reader needs to understand the article: the research must be 'translated' into plain English, with a simple, plain, punchy point.

The issue of balanced science reporting is currently (at the time of writing) being discussed on the Association of British Science Writers (ABSW) website [3], with particular reference to the 'MMR-causes-autism' disaster. Ben Goldacre and Steve Connor, Science Editor with *The Independent* newspaper, opened the debate. Goldacre says that every journalist, including Connor, is responsible for that fiasco, because all journalists misreported the facts at that time, presumably in a successful conspiracy to mislead the public in the name of turning a profit; yet in that 'debate'

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So what can we conclude from that? Well, *I* conclude that people read what they want to believe and disregard the rest. Presumably the vaccination-haters chose not to read *The Independent* (and other equally well-balanced reports) because they didn't want to; and presumably the editors fuelling the falsehoods produced what they knew their readers wanted to read (and turned a profit from that).

In the ABSW 'debate', Goldacre refers to a "baffling resistance [by the media] to engaging with its flaws". In a Perspective article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* [4], Susan Dentzer plainly attempts to engage with those very flaws. She suggests that "when interviewed by journalists about a news development such as a new study, [the authors] should offer to discuss the broader context, point reporters to any similar or contradictory studies, refer journalists to credible colleagues with differing perspectives, and mention any study limitations or caveats about the results, as well as any potential or real conflicts of interest among the study authors." Is it me, or is that so naïve as to be almost laughable? Let's say a scientist is amazingly stupid enough to suggest during his interview

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that his work might not actually be credible because it contradicts other publications on the subject, and that some of his peers disagree with him: what will a news journalist do with that information? At the very best, I can see the headline: "Study shows [item X] affects [condition Y]—but then again, maybe not..." (I don't want to think about the very worst

headline.) Also, we reporters have a word limit, and in a (for example) six-hundred word long piece, there simply isn't the space to deal with a debate on the validity of the results. And another thing: in my experience of writing up latest research results, there is often rivalry between groups researching the same subject—sometimes it's as bad as a soap opera! Some scientists I have interviewed have deliberately steered me away from people who disagree with their results, or they have run those scientists down to me (and not always off the record).

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➤ Furthermore, Susan Dentzer, who as Editor-in-Chief of the policy journal *Health Affairs* knows a thing or two about science journalism, suggests that “our profession ... should ... require that health stories, rather than being rendered in black and white, use all the grays on the palette to paint a comprehensive picture of inevitably complex realities.” Are we on the same planet? Are we talking about news? Sounds more like a peer-reviewed journal to me (and they sell like hot cakes on the news-stands, don’t they?)

Readers don’t want shades of grey. I asked the opinions of some esteemed colleagues of mine (my drinking buddies down the pub), what they thought of the reporting of health issues in the press. They actually said that they *wanted* facts to be reported in black and white. One asked me, “Ok Cathy, bottom line: the flu jab—yes or no?” I rest my case.

If the news has to *sell*, then logically we have to conclude that there is a *market* for that news. And having concluded above that people read what they want to read and ignore what they don’t want to read, and are fed what they want to read by their editors, we must conclude that supply must satisfy demand. So, I have to further conclude that it is the reader himself who determines what is written—in other words, badly written science is consumer-driven.

However, my aforementioned esteemed colleagues do not subscribe to my view of consumer-driven news.

Badly written science is consumer-driven

Their view is that it is unscrupulous news editors who are entirely to blame. It goes back to the need for a black-and-white answer by certain sections of the population. Thus the field is wide open for unscrupulous editors who recognise that requirement in their readers. These editors play upon ignorance. But it’s not just a question of inventing a whole load of ‘facts’ and arriving at a wrong and potentially dangerous conclusion (here’s Goldacre again [5]). The newspapers (editors) that push out this kind of trash exploit the currently prevalent mistrust of scientists by the ordinary man on the street. They appear to the reader to be letting him in on secrets that he couldn’t possibly otherwise know, warning him of the terrible truths behind the white-coated twits who are trying to poison or kill us all in the name of turning a profit. The last thing that that ordinary man would do would be to pick up a copy of *The Independent* or other broadsheet if it cannot tell him straight what his best mate, his newspaper, has just now made crystal clear—and confirmed what he always knew all along.

So I see what Susan Dentzer means by advocating a shades-of-grey style of reporting: it might well indeed put a halt to sensationalist, and hence unbalanced, reporting. But that’s not going to sell newspapers—and it certainly won’t be adopted by those unscrupulous editors with their eyes on the bank balance. I believe that badly reported news is consumer-driven (though I may be in a minority of

one). Ask any Hollywood celebrity about truthful reporting! You may believe that they court and therefore deserve the aggro, but that’s not the point—the situations have certain parallels. Am I the only one to deplore the paparazzi’s relentless pursuit of celebrity? Yet the glossy gossip mags disappear off the shelves in the millions—because there is a market for it. Whether you like it or not, the news *has to sell*—and *that’s* the problem.

Going back to Goldacre’s bafflement at the media’s supposed lack of interest in improving its reporting, it is I who am baffled by his belief that all journalists should be all tarred with the same brush (which they should not be), and by his extraordinary assumption that all newspaper editors want to report the truth (back to my celebrity point).

While certain editors can peddle lies and rumours (in the name of turning a profit) without fear of retribution, while certain sections of the population are willing to believe that scientists are evil geniuses hell-bent on destroying us all (in the name of turning a profit), while people want simple black-and-white answers to complex questions... then the misrepresentation of science and health issues will continue. And while intelligent and brave journalists and whistleblowers shoot each other in the foot, or cannot perceive or comprehend the concept of news as being in the market place and therefore all about turning a profit, then nothing co-ordinated or sensible will ever be done about it.

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Disclosure

Cathy Holding is a freelance consultant science editor and writer for *The Independent* newspaper (but has never met or engaged in conversation with Steve Connor); and she follows the *Bad Science* blog. Cathy Holding is currently working as a full-time employed medical writer with PreScript Communications Ltd., Baldock, Herts. (www.prescript.co.uk).

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