Mainstream Media Are Distorting Science. What Can Funders Do About It?

September 27, 2016
THE LIFECYCLE OF A SCIENCE NEWS STORY

RESEARCH → PRESS RELEASE → COVERAGE → CORRECTED COVERAGE
### SAME DATA, OPPOSITE CONCLUSIONS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TauRx Study @ AAIC 2016</th>
<th>“REALISTIC” HEADLINES</th>
<th>“OPTIMISTIC” HEADLINES</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fierce Biotech</strong></td>
<td>TauRx misses primary endpoints in Alzheimer’s combo PhIII trial</td>
<td><strong>New Scientist</strong></td>
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<td><strong>THE WALL STREET JOURNAL</strong></td>
<td>Experimental Alzheimer’s Drug Fails in Clinical Trial</td>
<td>Alzheimer’s drug that failed trial may still slow disease</td>
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<td>Biogen Study in Nature</td>
<td><strong>Medscape</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Telegraph</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Los Angeles Times</strong></td>
<td>Aducanumab Reduces Amyloid Plaques in Early Alzheimer’s: PRIME Published</td>
<td>Revolutionary twice-daily pill can slow the progress of Alzheimer’s and even trigger ‘extraordinary recoveries’</td>
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<td>Experimental drug reduces protein clumps and slows memory loss in early Alzheimer’s</td>
<td><strong>SCIENCE WORLD REPORT</strong></td>
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<td>Biogen’s Aducanumab: First Potential Drug That Could Treat Alzheimer’s Disease</td>
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A DECLINE IN REPORTER SUPPLY

Total newsroom workforce (1990 - 2015)

Data: The American Society of News Editors annual newsroom census
HAS RESULTED IN FEWER SPECIALIZED REPORTERS
THE INTERNET HAS RISEN IN PROMINENCE AS A SOURCE

• 1 in 3 Americans have gone online to figure out a medical condition*.
• Nearly 3 out of 4 Americans receive news from their mobile phones**.

**According to Newswhip 2016.
AND HAS CREATED A NEW DEFINITION OF “JOURNALIST”

- Bloggers
- Websites without good balance
- Tweeters who re-tweet incorrect information, spreading it further
- Sponsored content taken as news
  - *New treatment for Alzheimer’s*
  - *Never eat these foods*
  - *Always eat these foods*
  - *5 early signs of a heart attack*
HEADLINES ARE GEARED TO PRODUCE CLICKS
GOOGLE TOPS MEDIA SOURCES IN TRUST

Percent trust in each source for general news and information

Source: 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer
AND ENTERTAINMENT IS MASKED AS CREDIBLE MEDICAL ADVICE

4 Million Viewers

MORE THAN HALF OF MEDICAL ADVICE ON ‘DR. OZ’ LACKS PROOF OR CONTRADICTS BEST AVAILABLE SCIENCE: STUDY

Here Are 7 ‘Miracle’ Products Dr. Oz Had Peddled

That time Congress railed against Dr. Oz for his ‘miracle’ diet pills
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

• Do not assume what is clear to scientists will be clear to reporters
• Provide content for media that is pre-digested and ready for online use
• Put in the time to pre-brief media and others who will be likely to comment
• Recognize that newswire stories are likely to be printed and read on the news and invest time in these reporters
  • e.g. AP, Reuters, Bloomberg, Dow Jones, HealthDay
PREPARE ASSETS IN ADVANCE

- Messages and key supporting points
- Summary of the research
- Resist the impulse to be too detailed
- Core take-aways
- Questions it does not answer
PREPARE ASSETS IN ADVANCE

- List of key audiences you want to get the information directly and the media that reach them
  - Donors and potential funders
  - Policy makers and analysts
  - Other researchers
  - Patients, advocates and the general public
PREPARE ASSETS IN ADVANCE

• People
  • Decide who will speak for the data
    • Investigator(s)
    • Representative from the funding organization
    • Validators and endorsers – academics and patient advocacy/disease-related associations
  • Training or at least practice on messages and techniques
• Media monitoring
  • Google alerts are good but not enough
  • Good monitoring gives you the ability to pivot quickly and correct errors
PREPARE ASSETS IN ADVANCE

• Media assets, such as:
  • Press release – cooperating with the institution and/or congress secretariat
    • Resist common format and reduce content to top findings list
  • Tweets
  • Infographic illustrating key finding – or findings
  • YouTube interview with investigator
  • Fact sheet on the disease and unmet need addressed by research
  • Fact sheet on you as funder
  • Bios of researchers
FOSTER ACCURACY BY MAKING IT EASIER

Provide content that’s clear, concise, easy for media to drop into their coverage – or share on social media

Multimedia news releases – the new press kits – offer a one-stop content shop for time-pressed journalists
FOSTER ACCURACY BY MAKING IT EASIER

Infographics, photos and videos can be shared as-is by reporters, who are often hungry for social-friendly visual content.
BEFORE THE ANNOUNCEMENT

• Focus in on 5 key media
• Offer spokesperson for embargoed phone or desk side briefings
• Schedule meetings
• Go through the key points and offer media materials and interviews
DAY OF

• Release or hold press conference (these have become much less frequent)
• If data are being presented at a meeting work with the organization to coordinate announcement
• Schedule availability to take media calls or give in-person interviews
• Pitch story to media who may not have attended/called in
• Follow up with key reporters to ask if they need anything else
• Monitor coverage
After the announcement:

- **DO** correct errors
- Do not be afraid to reach out to media outlets with errors in coverage
- They want to get it right
- Check to see if they have made the correction and call back if not
- Send emails to document your requests
DOES IT WORK?


BCBSA HEALTH OF AMERICA REPORT
CESAREAN BIRTH TRENDS:
WHERE YOU LIVE SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACTS HOW YOU GIVE BIRTH

USA Today Snapshot

Average rate of births by Cesarean section in eight states – the USA’s highest

39%
THANK YOU