

SESSION 5:
THE VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS' POSITIONS

CHALLENGES FOR THE MEDIA: DISSEMINATING INFORMATION BY AVOIDING HYSTERIA

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Abstract

The media faces numerous challenges in attempting to inform the public about real hazards and dangers in this world without causing mass hysteria.

These challenges include the audience that is targeted, selection of appropriate language, and finding a balance between points of view. Other challenges that face the media include identifying the stories that genuinely require attention and recognising those based on hype or false claims.

Reporters are under a number of pressures from the media itself and this can lead to conflicts between the hysteria driving viewpoint and the more objective position. We must all be aware that bad news sells, conflict and controversy drive the news, and ratings or sales are important. Reporters also work to deadlines, and in an increasingly Internet driven age there is more pressure than ever to meet time restrictions.

The media is also faced with manipulation from a variety of sources, pressure groups, big business, political parties and so on. This can affect the quality of coverage surrounding an issue.

It must also be kept in mind that since the media are reporting for the public, the public have a duty to carefully analyse the information they receive, hysteria is not usually the result of a journalist's comment but of the public reaction to it. People do not base their decisions on the media alone, they do not believe everything they read and a great many other social factors come into play regarding hysteria.

1. Introduction

Hello, well the first thing I'd like to say is that despite the headlines promising nuclear terrorism, engineered viruses, rogue machines and grey goo we may not be doomed - so please don't panic.

I have been asked to talk about Challenges for the Media: Disseminating Information by Avoiding Hysteria.

I feel that in many ways the challenges facing the media are similar to those faced by researchers:

- Both want the public to know about new discoveries - the scientists partly because publicity helps with research funding and journalists because they want to sell copy!
- Both try to be objective
- Both face the challenge of communicating new results, which means they may have to educate the public to some extent.

The main difference in our challenges as I see it is that scientists tend to write for other scientists. Whereas the media has a different audience - the public. This brings us to a difference in types of media the specialist press verses the popular press.

The general public is confused and fed up with contradictory news reports over the pros and cons of new and old technologies.

They want a straightforward "Yes this is good" or "No this is bad." This presents a challenge for the writer since all too often the answer (as all things in life) is that there are some benefits and some risks.

Journalists often source their stories by rewriting press releases, adding some quotes from people involved and people who have an opposing view for balance. In the case of a newspaper their sub editor may then cut out 500 or so words to fit the story onto the page. This may just happen to be the "key" 500 words that avoided a panic or balanced a quote or explained the limitations of the study.

2. Role as Educators

The specialist press has a reduced educational role, we can usually assume that since someone is reading a specialist publication they know a little about the topic.

However, in the case of the popular press the reporter will have to deliver an oversimplified message, often the public does not understand the details behind a scientific method or a statistical analysis and some form of explanation will have to be offered. For example dozens of health and nutrition stories make it into the news media on a daily basis. Unfortunately most have no valuable take home message for readers. A good research study raises more questions than it answers. This is why so many scientists add "but we need to do more research."

The story should tell the reader how many people were studied. If only 20 people were in a group, the findings are less important than if 5,000 were analysed. Also, intervention studies (in which someone is told to change their diet or take a medication) tend to be much more reliable than an observational study in which people report on their habits with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy - can you remember what you ate five years ago?

Also a study carried out using healthy volunteers may not have the same importance for a patient with a disease. Analysis of results in men may not always apply to women. Generalisation of the results can lead to a hysterical response.

Of course, this method of hysteria avoidance relies on journalists understanding the analysis themselves.

3. Language

Selecting the appropriate language can be challenging. Language can be enlightening but it can also mislead through suggestion or use of emotional overtones. We only need to look at the words associated with the GM debate for evidence of this "Frankenfoods," "genetically altered" and "mutant" sound far scarier than "biotech" or "genetically modified." Even though the word mutant is a scientific term it has been popularised as a frightening thing.

In addition words such as "may," "might," "could," "possibly," "perhaps," and "potentially", are all capable of causing panic if strategically or carelessly placed.

However, language can also have unexpected results, during the recent SARS events risk communications experts say the media's anti-panic response made the public *MORE* likely to panic. They

discovered that statements such as "everything is under control" while appearing reassuring actually frightened the public. This was thought to be because the public concluded that if closed hospitals and multiple face masks were a sign of a situation that was "under control" then someone, somewhere was lying and no one was acknowledging that fact. This is a challenge that can be very difficult to face. In this case people needed to hear what was being done and why, rather than differing opinions on the outbreak or wild theories about where the disease had come from.

David Letterman joked on his Late Show, "We've got SARS, mad cow disease, an orange alert - the news is so bad the New York Times doesn't have to make it up," referring to a the recent scandal at the newspaper in which a reporter was found to have faked sources and datelines.

It may have been a joke but this comment reflects the fact that bad news sells. Reporters are pressured to find controversy. Good news stories are read and forgotten. Conflict and controversy drive the news, so sometimes the media would rather generate a scare than present the slightly less interesting balanced view.

Perhaps another important message from the popular press is that journalists can also be victims of spin, they must toe the line of their newspaper or editor and keep advertisers or other funders happy.

Some newspapers or TV channels want headlines to reflect their social and political agendas.

4. Time

Reporters work to deadlines, and in an increasingly Internet driven age there is more pressure than ever to turn a story around quickly. This reduces the opportunities for journalists to provide an objective view. Chasing quotes and fully understanding what is driving an issue can be a challenge. Accepting the quick, hysteria driving version is simple and effective - you meet your deadline - everyone is happy.

This is another case where the specialist press has an advantage - they often realise that a story does not *HAVE* to be presented today. They have more time to research the subject or more knowledge of what has taken place in the run up to a story. They are more willing to tie up the loose ends while the popular press often abandon a story mid-way through.

It should also be kept in mind that those people interested in generating hysteria are very good at manipulating the media, these groups can be all too aware of deadlines and can present a journalist with a ready made story, bite size quotes and interesting photographs.

The reporter may then be too busy, or too lazy to go and track down someone to present the opposing view. Also the person to supply an opposing view may want time to prepare their argument, or to gather evidence to support their view.

5. Who's Who?

Journalists are taught to cover both sides of a given issue, however, when conflicting opinions are presented they are often blandly stated, "He said," "She said," without any regard for who is making the claim, or the scientific consensus behind the claim.

Lack of understanding on the part of a reporter can seriously damage the quality of reporting by the news media, the reporters may fail to investigate or understand whether a so-called expert is an expert in the correct field. A scientist acting as a falsely proclaimed expert, criticising research about which they know little can also contribute greatly to hysteria.

The media must face up to the challenge of recognising what is driving the news crossing their desks:

- Social activists may present hysterical views to achieve social and political change.
- Businesses may spread scares to beat competitors or boost their product sales.
- Politicians may add to scares to curry political favour or generate publicity; and
- Researchers want to present their theory to the widest possible audience.

On the topic of researchers I might add that sometimes they can also be major drivers of hysteria. Some researchers are so keen to share their work that they produce press releases before the data has been thoroughly checked. Journalists then use this information or abstracts from scientific meetings to build their story. Coverage of non-peer-reviewed work can lead to scares and the spread of inaccurate information.

6. Conclusion

A journalist needs to present a story that is accessible to the public (and to the editor) and it needs to be written up quickly and it has to compete on pages full of dramatic events.

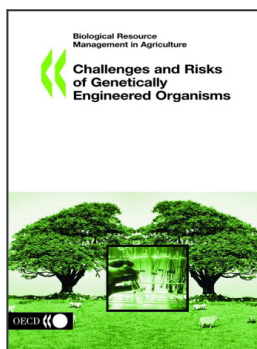
In the face of these challenges it is very difficult to say progress is being made - slowly - that there are no good or bad guys, and that the results have no practical significance as yet.

We should also keep in mind that the media play a vital role in alerting us to real hazards and dangers in this world, and that people do not base their decisions on the media alone, they do not believe everything they read and a great many other social factors come into play regarding hysteria.

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