

The Risks of Reporting Risk in the Mainstream Media: Educating Science Reporters

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Speakers:

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Most scientists view risk as a calculation, whereas the public interprets risk as a feeling, according to Maryn McKenna. The role of the mainstream media is to translate risk so that the public can truly understand it.

McKenna took the audience on a reverse tour from the mainstream media back to the journal, highlighting potential pitfalls. Six factors can detract from the public's ability to calculate risk: when multiple news sources report on the same article, magnifying the perception of risk; if people believe that they have no control over the risk; distrust of the institution reporting the risk; inability to estimate the probability of the risk; lack of choice; and unfamiliarity of the risk.

McKenna compared the reporting of the 2001 anthrax postal attack and the 2002 SARS outbreak. Federal restrictions on the free flow of information during the anthrax scare trumped the public's need for information, and, in a journalistic

interpretation of Gresham's Second Law, "bad information drove out good information". The Department of Health and Human Services clampdown on information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention resulted in a public perception of higher risk. In contrast, during the SARS outbreak, a change in the federal attitude resulted in international laboratory cooperation and rapid Web and print communication. The public was able to trust the information, to feel in control, and to estimate the risks without panic.

Lessons learned from the two examples: If you understand the components involved and recognize journalism's interpretive tendencies, risk can be managed and miscommunication reduced.

Ivan Oransky also used the SARS vs anthrax comparison to highlight that "timing is everything". He showed how unrelated news can delay mass-media uptake of a story and how, if a story breaks when seasoned science reporters are on holiday, something as ridiculous as the Raelians and their "cloned human" announcement might find its way into the pages of otherwise reputable outlets. In contrast, the press coverage of articles in *The Lancet* on the efficacy of mammography in breast-cancer screening demonstrated that occasionally the amount of coverage an article receives is based entirely on whether *The New York Times* covers it.

Oransky offered sources for reporters' ideas: competitors or other news outlets; press releases from journals, universities, and industry; journal studies; conferences; and tips from sources. His key observation was that a journal's efforts to provide news releases don't result in a preference among reporters, because the press releases are usually disseminated widely and don't offer a scoop.

Richard Lane was recently promoted from press officer to Web editor, and one of his first points was to make sure that

articles reporting on your journal include a Web link to it. He stressed that journals need to view every article as a potential mass-media article. On the practical side, Lane stated that 36 hours should be the minimal lead time to allow the press to prepare articles; any less may result in errors or failure to pick up the story.

To combat the complexity of press releases, Lane recommended that societies make spokespersons available to provide insight and context. Press conferences can also maximize accuracy and exposure. He cited a 2003 *Lancet* paper regarding in vitro fertilization and cancer risk and the accompanying press release as an example of how a press release can help to defuse a potentially incendiary situation. In his current role as Web editor, Lane suggested that societies use the Web as a forum to complement the mass-media noise and mentioned expedited Web publishing as a method to reach the public rapidly.

In response to Lane's point on expedited Web publishing, McKenna cautioned that although many journals can now publish online at any time, the mass media are still accustomed to receiving content on specific days of the week, and upsetting that routine may result in decreased coverage. 