

# Does Press Coverage of Journal Articles Really Matter?

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**Speakers:**

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Journals commonly produce press releases on a few of their articles. If mass-media coverage draws attention to a journal article, more MDs and PhDs will read it, increasing the likelihood that they will subscribe, and advertiser visibility will improve. Those possibilities are important enough that journals use clipping services to monitor their presence in the press.

When Ivan Oransky, deputy editor of *The Scientist*, looked for quantitative proof that increased citations result from extra journal publicity and press coverage, he found only two references: a 1991 Phillips study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, cited 79 times, and a 2002 article by Kiernan in *Science Communication*, cited twice. Phillips's data, obtained during the 1978 *New York Times* strike, used earmarked *New England Journal of Medicine* articles that had no added publicity, because the paper wasn't distributed. That control was compared with coverage in a normal period. Publicity was found to be more important than earmarking, inasmuch as high citation levels in the first year were absent during the strike period. Kiernan's study followed *New England*

*Journal of Medicine* and other journal articles covered by 2 dozen newspapers, including the *The New York Times*, and three major television networks. For 563 articles covered, 116 citations resulted; 2092 articles without coverage generated 90. Oransky's answer: Publicity works. If articles have press coverage, a citation add-on effect often results.

Ginger Pinholster, of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), publisher of *Science*, said that press outreach is important because its mission is to foster communication that advances science, serving the global community. AAAS distributes a weekly tipsheet to more than 5000 reporters, sends notices to 350 collegiate press officers, and disseminates press releases via EurekAlert! ([www.EurekAlert.org](http://www.EurekAlert.org)). Press coverage improves author, subscriber, and association-member recruitment. Author recognition increases exposure to future collaborators and funders. Paleontologist Matt Lamanna was quoted regarding funding and the effect on his dean and institution: "I chalk up a lot of my success to that [first graduate] paper and its press coverage."

Mainstream print science journalism is declining, said Pinholster. When BBC-Reuters polled adults globally, 82% considered national television their most trusted news source. Continued declines in US readership have spawned newspaper layoffs: Many have completely dropped science and medical writers. According to environmental reporter Andrew Revkin, *The New York Times* is the last remaining refuge for US science journalists. But not all print is dying. US Spanish-language dailies recently passed a circulation of 1.7 million. No circulation problems exist overseas, nor are they likely in such hotspots as China, with 200,000 science graduates (versus 50,000 in the United States). Because foreign papers could increase press outreach, AAAS now translates press packages.

In 2005, Pinholster charted story counts against citations of journal articles covered by National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, and ABC-TV. *The New York Times* had the highest story count, doubling citations. For two studies covered in all three media, citations had a 10-fold increase. Medical subjects get the biggest press pickup and the most citations. Eysenbach (*PLoS Biology*, May 2006) compared 1280 non-open-access with 212 open-access articles. The latter were twice as likely to be cited. Pinholster concluded that *New York Times* placement remains prestigious, but television and Internet ties are increasingly productive.

Pinholster observed that many "hot papers" do not have headlining themes; "even if not publicized, a paper is not doomed to obscurity." Several-fold increases in journal article downloads occur for only some press releases. Thus, article content matters. The audience noted that "editor's choice" sections in journals might increase citations. Pinholster stated that "credible or extensive press coverage seems to help boost citations for meritorious papers simply by making the work more accessible."

Oransky said that because 25% of conference presentations are not published, conference coverage is "too much, too soon" (Schwartz, Woloshin, and Baczek, *JAMA* 2002). Responding to questions on broadcast journalism and spin, Pinholster admitted that AAAS chooses contacts carefully. Second-tier media or public television could provide more than the 3-minute sound byte. Oransky said that in deciding whether to trust press releases, one must consider the source. Finally, reporters might not use press releases, because they don't offer a scoop. Many reporters don't even read the journal articles. Oransky quipped, "If you really want to have a horrible day, read my inbox." ☹