

Lost in translation: Corrections and the Lay Media

What issues do you see with the media's coverage of scientific research?

TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION

- As a freelance journalist I can see the problem of the media having no interest in covering a potential correction or retraction of a paper at the center of an earlier news report. Any notification/erratum in print or online and linked to the article in question is unlikely to reach lay people, who may have an interest but not the ability or means to go back to the academic literature
- At a time where the internet provides possibilities for all (be it lay and expert) to cut and paste scientific information and for it to lead its own life online, it may be necessary to reflect on copyright, Open Access and **accountability for scientific interpretation by those using information** from credible sources for news outlets with mainstream media objectives. **How can the truth be preserved when retractions and corrections of published material are involved?**

IS IT SEXY ENOUGH? WILL THEY UNDERSTAND?

- They have a difficult role **making scientific work understandable and of appeal to a general audience**. From the low prominence papers give when publishing their own errors or retractions it is hard to see them giving high prominence to scientific retractions/corrections unless there is the whiff of fraud or misconduct and the makings of a good story
- **Lack of media interest in corrections**, especially if they are not major. Media may be more interested in **why the correction was needed than the correction itself**. Also the initial research may not have been accurate to begin with
- **Media really only want to use stories that will sell**, so we rarely have papers that media are interested in using. We do have to be mindful about what images we accept in papers, in case they are taken out of context in media reports.
- **Sound-bites** often do not reflect the entire study

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF SCIENCE?

- We have always assumed that the initial published version is the authoritative result of the research. I am not sure how to respond if the article gets quoted in the media and then retracted or corrected

- 1. Factual incorrectness 2. Superficiality 3. **Lack of 'balance' due to lack of background understanding of the topic**
- 4. Tendency to adopt an approach of 'they used to say this, now they're saying the opposite', due to failure to appreciate nature of the 'science marches forward' approach
- **...journalists latch onto one small, often insignificant, detail that they can spin a story about**
- Too often **the actual point of the research is not even mentioned**, and too often the detail they focus on is twisted around, quite remote from the data and the scientific story that was told
- They almost always get it wrong

SENSATIONALIST

- **Sensationalist** approach. Widespread and unthinking use of one person's version of papers, often emphasising controversial aspects, e.g. MJA paper on child protection in obesity (Matthew A Sabin, Zoe McCallum, Kay Gibbons, George A Werther and Joseph Proietto. When does severe childhood obesity become a child protection issue? *Med J Aust* 2009; 190 (11): 653-655.)
- **Sensationalisation** of meagre findings, and lack of a critical perspective
- They like to sensationalise small parts of the issue while providing no comment on the parts that actually matter in the decision making
- **Media often prefer the bad or controversial news to the good - "sells more papers"**. They have publication deadlines that may result in **less rigorous research of their story facts** than is advisable - run with it anyway **"half cocked"**! Once the (inflammatory) story has been run, there is perhaps sometimes little appetite to retract, or even to clarify
- There is a clear gap between the very scientifically oriented writing, and the popular media's interpretation of that for their lay readers - often with factual errors introduced in the process of simplifying for easier understanding. There are some, but not enough, good writers who can bridge that gap fluently, particularly objective writers without their own 'axes to grind' on the topic