

New research must be better reported, the future of society depends on it



*Academics looking to communicate the findings and value of their research to wider audiences are increasingly going through the media to do so. But, argues **Andy Tattersall**, poor or incomplete reporting can undermine respect for experts by misrepresenting research, especially by trivialising or sensationalising it, or publishing under inappropriate headlines and with cherry-picked statistics. Proper and accurate communication of science is beneficial to the whole of society; in the age of “fake news” it is more important than ever to make sure that what’s being published is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.*

Newspaper articles, TV appearances and radio slots are [increasingly important](#) ways for academics to [communicate their research to wider audiences](#). Whether that be the latest health research findings or discoveries from the deepest, darkest parts of the universe. In this way, the internet can also help to facilitate these channels of communication – as well as discussions between academics, funders and publishers, and citizen scientists and the general public.

Yet all too often research-led stories start with “[researchers have found](#)”, with little mention of their names, institution and who funded their work. And the problem is that by reporting new research in this way, it fails to break down the stereotypical image of an ivory tower. For all readers know these “researchers” might as well be wearing white lab coats with the word “boffin” on their name badges.

Rolling news

News is now a 24-hour operation. Rolling coverage of stories means journalists have their work cut out in maintaining this cycle. But that is no excuse for missing out important pieces of information that underpin a story. Take for example a story relating to health research that has wide ranging societal impact. Supporting evidence, links and named academics help a story’s authenticity and credibility. And at a time when “[fake news](#)” is an increasingly sticky problem it becomes essential to link to the actual research and therefore the facts.

This is important, because research goes through a [peer review](#) process where experts in the same field of research critically assess the work before it can be published. This is similar to news stories that are edited to ensure they are of good quality – although this process takes far less time.

Accurate reporting

In academia there has been a huge move to make research [openly available](#) and therefore accessible for the whole of society. While research institutions are making great strides in public engagement and the wider understanding of science, media organisations still remain instrumental in that process. And while it’s been claimed that the public are [tired of experts](#), the impact they have on society – from building skyscrapers to keeping us alive – is undoubtedly fundamental to our existence.

But poor or incomplete reporting undermines respect for experts by [misrepresenting the research](#), especially by trivialising or sensationalising it. So while academics from various disciplines are often willing to talk to the media – either as an author or from an independent expert viewpoint – misreporting of research and particularly data (whether intentional or unintentional) has a negative effect.

Academics are then vilified as having something to hide or accused of making up their research, while members of the public are exposed to unnecessary anxiety and stress by inappropriate headlines and cherry-picked statistics that are reported in a biased way.

The public good

Of course, not everyone will want to check the citations and research outputs – and not everyone has the critical skills to assess a piece of specialised academic writing. Yet there are lots of people who, given the opportunity, would be interested in reading more about a research topic. Media coverage opens up a democratic debate, allows people to explore the works of an accomplished researcher and helps the [public understanding of science](#). And in this way, fair and accurate reporting of research encourages academics to be willing to work with the media more regularly and build good working relationships.

Not only that, but the proper and accurate communication of science is beneficial to the whole of society – from the government to its citizens. So in the age of “fake news” it is more important than ever to make sure that what’s being published is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

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