
Avoiding False Balance: Vaccines in the Media

Introduction: What is False Balance?

Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, medical advances in the development of new vaccines, and controversy over legislative attempts to strengthen state immunization laws means that vaccines are often in the news. While it's easy for members of the media to track the development of new vaccines and report on disease outbreaks using data from state health departments, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other sources of medical and scientific information, it can be far more difficult to accurately report on the social aspect of vaccines.

Reporting on the perceived controversy over the safety and effectiveness of vaccines can be particularly difficult—especially since no controversy involving the safety and effectiveness of vaccines actually exists.

Still, reporters often find the manufactured controversy interesting, since it stirs up a great deal of public interest. And, because journalists are trained to take an objective approach to their reporting and to provide balance, they can fall prey to what is termed “false balance.” *This common journalistic error can have particularly unfortunate results in the realms vaccines and climate science.*

When including people in any kind of media report who take a stance on vaccines that is not backed by the facts, journalists can unwittingly promote the following:

- **Giving scientifically invalid ideas equal weight** to established and verifiable scientific facts by including them in the piece without addressing the fact they are false (e.g., allowing an interviewee to say her child's autism was caused by vaccines without including a correction—by the reporter—that scientific consensus shows this parent's statement is unwarranted based on the evidence).
- **Giving a person with a scientifically invalid position on vaccines but no expertise equal weight to a vaccine expert** whose explanation is aligned with scientific facts (e.g., interviewing a parent who feels vaccines contain “toxins” alongside a doctor discussing the safety of vaccines--making it appear as though their positions are equally valid when they are not).
- **Allowing the social controversy to seem larger than it actually is.** (e.g. interviewing only parents who refuse vaccines for their children, even though well over 90% of parents do vaccinate their children).



It's easy to see why giving equal air-time to a person who represents a scientifically invalid view held by fewer than 10% of parents and 0% of doctors to an individual representing scientific consensus and 90% of parents promotes false balance. This is one reason we no longer see so-called "climate skeptic" researchers included in conversations on climate change.

What Are the Potential Effects of Engaging in False Balance?

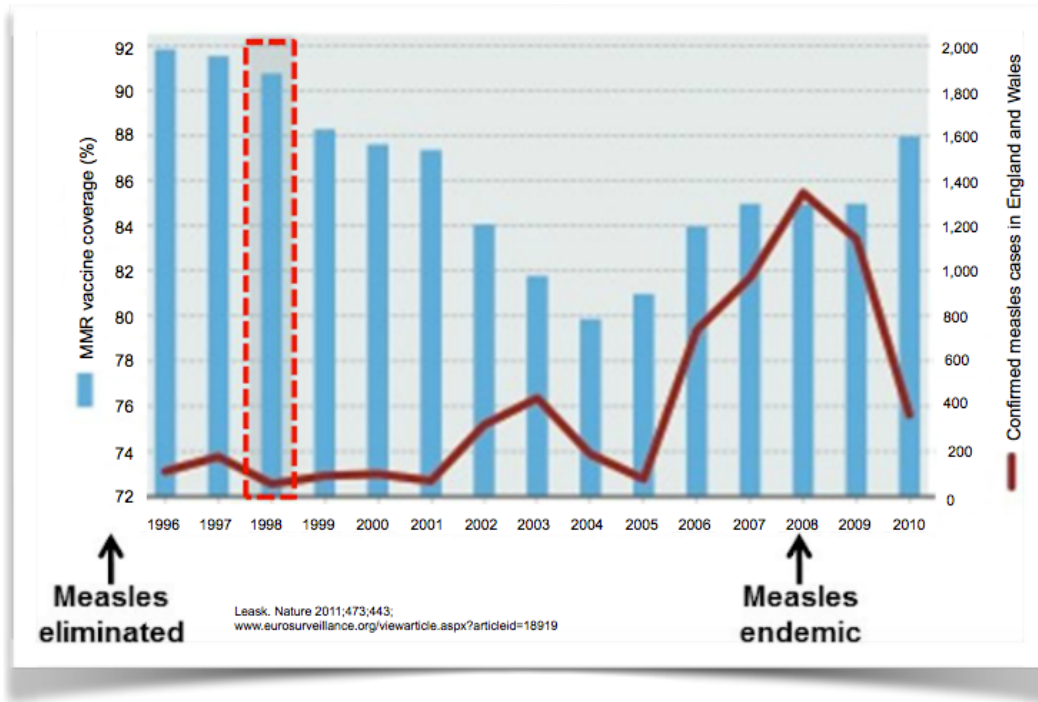
Focusing on the social controversy of vaccines is tantalizing, but **it does not present the public with an accurate understanding of vaccines**. Reporting on science is different from reporting on politics, because in science, the facts are reproducible and verifiable. Underplaying the science to emphasize the social controversy can *mislead* parents about vaccines, leading to decisions that are not based on correct facts and accurate risk-assessment.

When it comes to vaccines, the costs of such misrepresentations can be high.

The results of the reporting about Andrew Wakefield's fraudulent article on the MMR vaccine which was published in *The Lancet* was a dramatic decrease in immunization coverage for that vaccine, and which resulted in the reintroduction of measles in the UK, which was once eliminated and is again endemic.

Unfortunately, this unfounded fear of the MMR vaccine infected the United States as well, and in the early months of 2015, we have seen the results of the media's magnification of Wakefield's report—an unprecedented outbreak of measles, sparked by unvaccinated individuals.



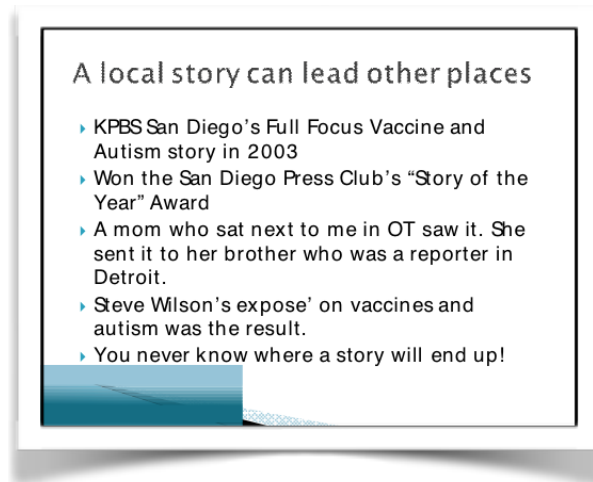


Despite the fact that The Lancet retracted Wakefield’s report, and despite the fact that Wakefield himself was stripped of his right to practice medicine in the UK because of the fraudulent nature of his article on the MMR, the vaccine-autism myth continues to be a topic of media stories.

Reporters regularly feature parents who claim--against all medical and scientific evidence--that their children’s autism was caused by vaccines. In fact, some of these parents are considered well-known “experts” and media sources.



For example, Becky Estepp, anti-vaccine media expert who is often a go-to source for local media, [explained](#) that being featured on local media has helped her spread her misinformation far and wide. She uses the spread of her views across media outlets as an object lesson to others trying to overcome the lack of science in their position:



The resulting measles outbreaks in the United States can be linked directly to low vaccine coverage for this immunization, a choice made by parents because they fear the vaccine is either “toxic” or causes autism.

This false information comes to them from many media sources, *including mainstream stories that feature parents who believe vaccines are dangerous*. When these parents are featured in news reports, they are positioned to spread their stance on vaccines to others.



What Happens When the Anti-Vaccine Movement Engages the Media?

Human interest stories are an important facet of journalism, but should not be used at the expense of verifiable fact, a hallmark of all good reporting. When personal experience contradicts scientific fact, and reporters feel compelled to include such a personal experience in a report, false information and inaccuracies must be clearly **highlighted by the reporter**—not just by someone else featured in the piece.

How the “Vaccine Controversy” Is Like the Climate Change “Debate.”

For several years, journalists covering the climate change issue saw it as a controversy requiring equal air time for both the climate change scientists and the handful of scientists—most of them funded by oil companies—who felt the climate was not warming. This approach prolonged—and continues to prolong—a period of doubt about climate change. The result of the media’s approach to this issue is that while more than 98% of climate scientists are in agreement that our planet is warming, people in the United States are split on the issue. The result is that we’ve been hindered in addressing pressing issues related to combating climate change and are seeing the very real effects the lag in action caused by this manufactured uncertainty is having.

Vaccines are remarkably similar case, in that the scientific consensus on the safety and effectiveness of vaccines is perhaps even more overwhelming.

Yet we regularly see parents who don’t vaccinate and anti-vaccine activists featured in media reports on vaccines. Like the climate skeptics who were once regularly featured in journalism about climate change, anti-vaccine activists are deeply invested in getting the attention of local media and leveraging that attention to their own advantage.



In one [media training presentation](#), Becky Estepp (communication director for an anti-vaccine organization) told parents that the media are “a little birdy, and you want them on your window sill.” She also told the activists that they had an “End Game,” namely:

“It is up to us to change the opinions of the public. Once we win in the court of public opinion and the citizens demand change, that is when policy will be affected.”

The media is the main tool anti-vaccine activists rely upon to advance their ideas.

But science is not decided in the court of public opinion, and journalists need to be on guard about falling prey to false balance in order to report accurately about the facts involving vaccines.

For Further Reading:

Brainard, C. (2013). Sticking with the truth: How 'balanced' coverage helped sustain the bogus claim that childhood vaccines can cause autism. *Columbia Journalism Review*. See more at: http://www.cjr.org/feature/sticking_with_the_truth.php?page=all#sthash.cY82FDDk.dpuf

Sullivan, M. (2015, February 7). Another Outbreak of 'False Balance'? *New York Times*. Retrieved February 10, 2015, from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/opinion/sunday/another-outbreak-of-false-balance.html?_r=0

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