

# A Journalist's Perspective on Risk Communication

---

Kathryn O'Hara  
Carleton University

September 30, 2009  
University of Ottawa

# Doctors are the most trustworthy and journalists the least, poll finds

---

## Daily Telegraph

Doctors are the most trusted profession according to new poll, above judges, priests and journalists.

by Rebecca Smith, Medical Editor

Published: 12:01AM GMT 12 Feb 2009

It is the 25th year running that **doctors** have been rated as the most trustworthy in the survey **commissioned by the Royal College of Physicians.**

# **‘Doctors, pharmacists top list of professionals Canadians trust most’**

---

Canwest Newservice.

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Nanos Research poll.

# Most Trusted Professions

June  
2009

## Readers' Digest poll Harris decima

---

1. Firefighters
2. Ambulance drivers/paramedics
3. Airline pilots
4. Nurses
5. Pharmacists
6. Doctors
7. Police
8. Armed forces
9. Veterinarians
10. Dentists
11. Teachers

# Least Trusted

---

29. Lawyers
30. Print journalists
31. Actors/actresses
32. Car mechanics
33. Investment brokers
34. Taxi drivers
35. Psychics/astrologers
36. CEOs
37. Real estate agents
38. Home building contractors
39. Politicians
40. Car salespeople

# Isn't it good to know only

---

- Four out of 10 Canadians trust polls. That is according to - of course - a poll by Ipsos Reid.

Globe and Mail online, august 28. 2009

# Human interest

---

For the most part, reporters, editors and producers do not misrepresent risks because they calculate that this is the best way to boost profits. They do it because information that grabs and holds readers, grabs and holds reporters.

Gardner, Risk. 2008

# Pressure points on journalists

---

- 24/7 new cycles
- Science journalism beats
- Social network advocacy
- Industry lobbying and marketing
- Independent scientific sources
- Difficulty with data
- Scientific uncertainty

# What makes news?

---

- novelty
- originality
- proximity
- personality
- concern, controversy, conflict
- relevance to real life, relevance to many people.

# THE SCIENCE NEWS CYCLE

JORGE CHAM © 2009

Start Here

**Your Research**  
 Conclusion: **A is correlated with B** ( $\rho=0.56$ ), given C, assuming D and under E conditions.



...is translated by...

**UNIVERSITY PR OFFICE**  
 (YES, YOU HAVE ONE)  
 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:  
 SCIENTISTS FIND POTENTIAL LINK BETWEEN A AND B (UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS).



...which is then picked up by...

**NEWS WIRE ORGANIZATIONS**  
 A CAUSES B, SAY SCIENTISTS.



...who are read by ...

**THE INTERNETS**

Scientists out to kill us again.  
 POSTED BY RANDOM DUDE  
 Comments (377)  
 OMG! i kneeww it!!!  
 WTH?????????  
 ...



...then noticed by...

We saw it on a Blog!  
**A causes B all the time**  
 What will this mean for Obama?  
 BREAKING NEWS BREAKING NEWS BREA

**CNC Cable NEWS**



...and caught on ...

**4 LOCAL EYEWITLESS NEWS**

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT "A"... CAN KILL YOU! MORE AT 11...



...eventually making it to...

**YOUR GRANDMA**



- 
- Environmental decision makers are in the same position as reporters. At some point, a decision has to be made, a story has to be written. You go with what you have; it is your best guess at the moment.

Diane Dumanoski, science reporter. 1999

# Personalization of risk

---

Readers and viewers need to have a sense about what risk assessment can and cannot say about individual risks versus population risk.

William H. Farland, director EPA ,1999

# Accuracy, Balance, Conciseness

---

“ Journalists do struggle to balance the responsibility to raise awareness of risk with the responsibility to not unnecessarily alarm the public.”

Wilson et al. Reporting of theoretical health risks. BMC. 2004

## Tough times for science journalism

---

'In a science-centered age, we're becoming a society that lacks a professional and impartial means of informing its citizenry about science and it is happening one journalist at a time.'

Chris Mooney, science journalist and critic, 2009.

# BetterPlasticAwareness

The battle to ban bisphenol A

HOME THE ADVOCATES THE GOVERNMENT THE SCIENCE THE MEDIA THE BUSINESS THE AFTERMATH

## The story unfolds . . .

### The pressure builds: Citizens and advocates at work

The call to ban bisphenol A gets louder as advocacy groups gather support.

### Making policy: It's a matter of balancing risk

The verdict on bisphenol A is in after a lengthy Health Canada review.

### Wading through the science

The weight of evidence can lead to conflicting scientific opinion.

### Media's message in a bottle

Cast of cute babies and concerned parents create a media sensation.

### Retailers jump on the ban bandwagon

Consumers look to new alternatives as the bottles come off the shelves.

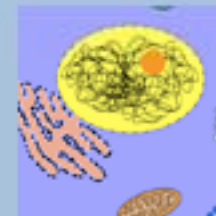
### Bisphenol A: What do we do now?

Science communication lessons for the government, journalists and scientists.

## Interactive



» INFO GRA  
Plastic awar



» ANIMATIO  
Bisphenol A



» SLIDESH  
Disposal of

# Thank you

---

## Sources

---

Bubela, T. et al. **Science communication reconsidered**. Commentary. Nature Biotechnology, June 2009. Viewed on-line June 10 2009

Barnett T, Dumonoski, D. Science in the Public Arena: a panel discussion. Chapter from **Communicating Uncertainty: Media Coverage of New and Controversial Science** ed: Sharon Dunwoody, Sharom M. Friedan, Carol L Rogers. Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc., Mahwah, 1999.

Gardner, D. **Risk: the science and politics of fear**. McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 2008.

Mooney,C.[http://scienceblogs.com/intersection/2009/02/the\\_death\\_and\\_strangulation\\_of.php](http://scienceblogs.com/intersection/2009/02/the_death_and_strangulation_of.php)

Narayanan, Annapurni. **Better Plastic Awareness**, the Battle of BPA. Master's project, Carleton University, Oct. 2008.

Wilson et al, **The Reporting of theoretical health risks: Canadian newspaper reporting of potential blood transmission Kroetzfeldt-Jakob disease**. published online jan 5.2004, Biomedcentral. Public Health. [www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-4-1.pdf](http://www.biomedcentral.com/content/pdf/1471-2458-4-1.pdf)

*On-line Sources* for news headlines.

Daily Telegraph February 12. 2009 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/4591602/Doctors-are-the-most-trustworthy-and-journalists-the-least-poll-finds.html>. Viewed online 23/09/2009

Canwestnews Sept.23 2009. Nanos Research <http://www.calgaryherald.com/news/Doctors+pharmacists+most+trustworthy+professionals+survey/2020683/story.html>. Viewed online 13.09/2009

Readers Digest poll [http://www.readersdigest.ca/mag/cms/xcms/the-canadians-you-trust\\_2745\\_a.html](http://www.readersdigest.ca/mag/cms/xcms/the-canadians-you-trust_2745_a.html) viewed online 23/09/2009  
Globe and mail august 29.2009 Ipsos Global Public Affairs CEO **Darrell Bricker** took questions on public-opinion research Aug 28, 2009 6:35PM EDT.