

Blame Academia for Junk Science and Media Hype?



By Alex Berezow — February 19, 2019



Credit: Kai Mörk/Wikipedia [1]

Though we've been debunking junk science for more than 40 years, we never cease to be amazed by the amount of hype and exaggeration that continues to permeate the mainstream press.

The following constitute just a tiny sample of the nonsense we read on a daily basis: Multiple international news outlets, such as *The Guardian* and *The Times* of London, reported that [asparagus](#) [2] (yes, that disgusting but quite healthy vegetable) causes breast cancer; *Reader's Digest* [reported](#) [3] that vegetable oil will turn girls into [lazy, TV-watching diabetics](#) [4]; and media outlets all over the world breathlessly reported that the popular [Nutella spread is linked to cancer](#) [5].

How on Earth does the media print such inanity over and over again? Two reasons immediately come to mind. First, the media cares more about internet traffic (and money) than anything else, which is why they write "clickbait" headlines and push sensationalist scaremongering. They want these stories to go viral; accuracy is of secondary importance. Second, science journalists often have no formal education in the field, so they have no idea if what they're reporting is sensible or hogwash.

But there's another place we should be assigning blame: University press offices.

Academic Press Releases Fan the Flames of Media Hype

A [paper](#) [6] published in 2014 in *The British Medical Journal* analyzed 462 press releases issued by universities in the UK. They found that "40%... of the press releases contained exaggerated advice, 33%... contained exaggerated causal claims, and 36%... contained exaggerated inference to humans from animal research."

The authors also discovered that if a press release contained exaggerated information, news

reports were also likelier to contain exaggerations. Specifically, the odds of exaggerated advice were increased 6.5 times, the odds of exaggerated causal claims were increased 20 times, and the odds of exaggerated inference to humans from animal research was increased 56 times. In other words, university press offices greatly influence the tone of subsequent media coverage.

The University Hype Machine

In an ideal world, universities perform serious research and don't worry about marketing themselves to journalists. But, that's not the world we live in. The ever-constant pressures of fame and fortune compel academics to behave in ways that are counterproductive to the scientific enterprise and public health.

There are no easy solutions to this. Like hyperpartisanship, some problems require a fundamental shift in our culture and societal thinking. Let's hope we wise up sooner rather than later.

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journalism#/media/File:Msc_2008-Saturday,_09.00_-_11.00_Uhr-Moerk001_Sa.jpg

[2] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/02/08/no-asparagus-wont-give-you-cancer-12546>

[3] <https://www.rd.com/health/healthy-eating/cooking-oils-and-diabetes/>

[4] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/04/14/no-vegetable-oil-wont-make-girls-lazy-tv-watching-diabetics-11133>

[5] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/01/12/nutella-cancer-story-gives-fake-news-bad-name-10723>

[6] <https://www.bmj.com/content/349/bmj.g7015>