Mourning TV's AM News

By ACSH Staff — December 5, 2007

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The days when you could count on hard news in the morning are long over. But as the morning news extends from breakfast to brunch, the standards have fallen even more.

As New York Times TV critic Alessandra Stanley pointed out in a column [2] entitled "Morning TV Veers From News To Frills," morning programs like Today on NBC and The View on ABC are the modern equivalents of the old Barbizon Hotel for Women, a frilly haven where men were not allowed above the first floor -- or here, after the first hour -- and viewers are treated to diet tips, ambush makeovers, cancer health scares, relationship counseling, and, of course, shopping.

The fact that "cancer health scares" falls into the same category as makeovers, relationship counseling and shopping is pretty telling. It is telling about those who generate the scares, those who report on them, and most striking, those who consume them.

Before we break down each of these three groups, lets just get our terminology clear. By cancer health scares, we refer to hyped warnings that have little or no relevance to actual cancer prevention. That's why we call it a "scare." Cancer scare stories are about "toxic" chemicals under your sink, "carcinogens in your makeup" or minute pesticide residues on fruit. Reports about cancer risks from cigarettes, overexposure to the sun, or abuse of alcohol are not where you'll usually find the "scare." You can read a list of the top ten scares of last year, here [3].

Scare Generators

Activist groups who promote these scares are good at what they do. In fact, they are experts at promoting alarmist headlines for the TV news. It's just their science that's bad. Good stories, bad science [4].
In fact, in our review of activist scares, in most cases, the scares are not subjected to independent peer review. Rather, the claims are often extrapolations from small studies or animal studies, and lack reliable and reproducible supporting evidence. This is not the way mainstream science works. Contrast this activist “quick and dirty” approach with what scientists in academic institutions must do. They have to submit their work to journals that then have the papers reviewed by other scientists with appropriate expertise. These papers must clearly explain the methodology and acknowledge potential biases, or weaknesses in the conclusions. If a body of work does not pass muster, it will either be rejected for publication, or the author will be required to revise it, and perhaps supply additional information, before it is published. While this process isn't always perfect, it is the best procedure we have to insure that the scientific information presented to the public is based on valid data that are analyzed in an appropriate manner. Yet activist claims rarely come close to meeting these most basic tenets of producing scientific information.

Moreover, mainstream scientists understand that a single report, wherever it may be published, is not "proof" of a theory or hypothesis. Experiments or observations must be replicated by independent research in order to be considered valid. Often, however, advocacy groups don't wait for confirmation before sounding an alarm that may be based on poorly designed or single studies, or on studies that are performed only on laboratory animals. When disapproving of a product or chemical, they may cite anecdotal, unsupported reports of ill effects, neglecting to validate the data. Or, they may cite data selectively, choosing only those data that support the point(s) they wish to make.

Another feature of many of these groups' alarms is direct extrapolation of data from high-dose animal tests to predict disease risk in humans. The assumption is that any chemical, food, or product that causes harm to animals in high-dose testing situations must also harm humans, even if the typical human exposure is orders of magnitude less than those used in the animal tests.

While animal testing is certainly a valid and necessary means of examining the possibility that a chemical might be harmful to humans, a finding of harm in such tests does not automatically mean that humans exposed at much lower doses will also be harmed. More information, such as typical or expected toxicity and actual human exposure, must also be factored into any assessment of risk. Further, the possibility that any chemical or compound is harmful to humans is strengthened if it is found to be harmful to more than one species of experimental animal. Thus, finding that a compound is toxic or carcinogenic at high dose to laboratory rats, but not to mice or rabbits, would weaken the argument that humans might be affected (for more information on animal testing, see the ACSH publications "Of Mice and Mandates" [5] and America's War on "Carcinogens").

Yet, such scientific facts are only rarely mentioned, and then as caveats at the end of a story.

Scare Reporters
Reporting about health risks isn't easy. It involves an understanding of the complexities of risk assessment, an ability to distinguish between scientific and pseudoscientific information, the capacity to evaluate and digest complicated material, and the communication skills to portray the risk in the proper context. Simplistic or contradictory messages can leave readers confused and wary; they "tune out" -- and you lose your audience.

Some journalists would rather just report on the scare, without asking the hard questions, simply because it makes for good television, as the Today Show's producers have concluded.

Many reporters make a living reporting about these scares. Some, like ABC's John Stossel, have seen the light and now shine a light on the groups with whom they were once compliant. But for the most part, it's all about giving the consumers of TV news, the viewers, what they want.

**Scare Consumers**

As the Times review of morning shows suggested, parents of babies and young children often are the group most concerned about potential health risks stemming from foods or environmental exposures. These are the women that hang around to watch that fourth hour of Today.

Who can blame a mother who is upset by a report that the baby formula she's feeding her baby is contaminated with a scary sounding chemical, such as BPA, as they did today on CNN. Yet the facts about BPA would make it clear that no worry, or in fact, no news story, is needed.

Parents feel it is their responsibility to educate themselves about potential threats to their children. In fact, those parental concerns are a good thing. But those same parents should be outraged to know that activist groups and opportunistic reporters play on these fears. Activists and some reporters conspire to put out self-serving scares without more than, at most, a nod to "balance," by quoting an untrustworthy "industry spokesman." This tends to add to, rather than balance, the credibility of the allegations. What are consumers to do? Unfortunately, precious little. But they could do what I've done, and vote with the remote, and not watch.