

The Jade Goody effect: Are journalists scaring people into the arms of their GP?

Are journalists bad for your health? Abridged

"I'm incredibly proud of those films; the Living TV audience and demographic is young women so they were very relevant"

Mark discussed the story behind the commissioning of the Jade Goody documentaries, showing her life and at the same time the course of her illness. He expanded Jade's reasons for making the film and set out very honestly the commercial arrangements, which were not as often shown in the media: for example Jade had final veto of all films.

"She really wanted to raise awareness in the only medium that she knew, and Jade's medium was television"



Mark Sammons

Head of Factual Entertainment at Sky

The decision to make the show wasn't about public service, but the information was on the website for women who felt affected. **"If you're a responsible broadcaster you make sure you point them in the right direction"**

"It did nothing else except encourage the young living TV audience to take responsibility for their health"

JT: You said that Jade saw it as her job to raise awareness of cervical cancer

She wanted to say to a young audience **"you're not immortal and you need to take responsibility for your own health"**

"Good information on cancer... understanding rather than fear"

Margret argued that the publicity around Jade's situation had real-life consequences. For example the government received a petition with 200,000 signatures asking for the age of cervical screening to be lowered to 20. However she suggested that screening 20-25 year olds can cause more harm than good.

"The idea that screening is benign help that saves lives is wrong"

She also suggested that the disease was over emphasised since cervical cancer is very rare and only makes up 2/100 cancers in women. She argued documentaries and the media storm around them created **"fear rather than clear information"**



Margaret McCartney

A GP and medical writer

Raising awareness is not always a good thing

"Most young women are not going to get this rare cancer". The result of the media's reaction to Jade's illness was **"too much information, but not enough fair information, adults don't need to be scared into doing things"**

KEY QUESTIONS

- Is raising awareness of an issue ever a bad thing?
- How did these films impact young women? Did they scare them about one particular (very rare) issue or alternatively did they inspire them to take responsibility for their own health?
- Where should you draw the line between entertainment and health impact?

Chaired by
Jacqui Thornton



Binge drink nation: *How much is too much?*

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“There is no safe level of alcohol consumption for cancer... but why don't people know that?”

Mark Bellis explained that “there are more than 60 diseases that increase in risk as you start increasing alcohol”. He used statistics to outline the UK's current situation :

- **Drinking sensibly can still mean having as much as a 1 in 50 chance of dying due to an alcohol related disease or incident**
- **30% of the drinkers consume 80% of the alcohol sold**
- **An average of approximately 24 units of alcohol are sold per week per drinker**

He also talked about how alcohol is heavily linked to issues like abuse. He then discussed the difficulties faced by journalists in reporting this topic ranging from denial in the alcohol industry creating doubt to the need to find conflict to create a story.

“I don't hold journalists responsible for very much at all”

Ian started out with by saying that he believes **“journalists are not morally responsible collectively”**.

For the issue of binge drinking, he suggested the press present it as a problem in order to sell stories and politicians present it as a problem because the voters say so . However he questioned if it was a new phenomenon and also if the right solution was to ban alcohol advertising.

He maintained that the UK already has some of the strictest alcohol advertising laws and finished by saying that actually **alcohol consumption in the UK is going down.**



Professor Mark Bellis OBE

Director of the Centre for Public Health (at Liverpool John Moores University)

JT: What do you think about how alcohol stories are reported?

There is some balanced coverage, but this is few and far between. It is difficult for stories to take sides. They often give theories supported by less evidence equal amounts of time with more accepted facts.

Advertising makes you more likely to drink and needs a proportionate message of the risks involved, not just “drink responsibly”... What does that mean?

The alcohol industry is not interested in irresponsible drinking it wants repeat purchasers. Advertising is about brand value.

Alcohol advertising is aimed largely at the 30% who consume 80% of the alcohol

Most of the spending by alcohol companies is to persuade you to buy one beer over another. **Banning alcohol advertising isn't the answer... we need a “more socially responsible attitude overall”**

JT: In your talk Mark there are potentially good stories. Who is to blame for not getting these across?

Shared blame; on the health side we do need to become more savvy with the media, but on the reporting side people do need to frame the story and consider the overall balance of evidence involved.

Audience: What do you think is the responsibility of the journalist?

To at least check a pro alcohol news story and put it into perspective with the vast majority of information that is out there on alcohol related harms. Also journalists should just ask the question **“ was alcohol part of this? ”** more, which can show alcohol is playing a part in a whole lot of problems going on in society.

Journalists **“have a right to get into print anything they want to say”** and it's not right to expect them to go in one way or another. However I would personally like to see **less over-exaggeration from journalists.**



Dr Ian Twinn

Director of Public Affairs at the ISBA (The voice of British advertisers)

KEY QUESTIONS

- Is media coverage of alcohol issues properly balanced? Does it rationally reflect risk or is it hysterical in tone?
- What role does the media industry have in presenting the “drink responsibly” message?

Chaired by **Jacqui Thornton**



Media hype: *You said we'd all be dead by now?*

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“Journalists, of course, don't always get it right”

Branwen works as part of a team, including science graduates and doctors, which makes complex health issues easier to interpret. However journalists are often working alone on these issues under tight deadlines.

She identified some of the issues journalists are facing:

- A **lack of consensus** about how the evidence should be interpreted.
- Organisations presenting **statistics to fit their agenda**
- **How to present risks to the public**, balancing the need for short-snappy headlines with presenting risks in context.

She then went on to say that the important thing is that **journalists get it right enough...**

Making use of the feedback they get from their audience.

Sense about Science is a small charity that connects people concerned about a scientific issues with scientists. Most of the questions come from civic society organisations and last year 70% of their calls were health related. All these calls are trying to make sense of health stories, often from media, asking questions like **how sure are the scientists?**

“Sometimes the media reports the bad ideas but misses out the good ideas, and bad ideas endure”

She identified that bad ideas often get more time in the media. However the media is not wholly responsible for this as other factors, for example the way scientists communicate their findings, affect this situation.



Branwen Jeffreys

BBC news health correspondent

The media is not a vacuum, for example one of the reasons swine flu was such a major story was it happened at a light news time. The health secretary stood up in the house of commons and said that we could expect 100,000 new cases a day by the end of August. This was news and also at this stage we no way of knowing whether these predictions would be accurate or not.

JT: Did the media hype around swine flu actually help the public; did it make them more aware of the issue and take preventative measures?

Maybe, but when the situation plays out we don't get the same headlines saying **“Well done everybody on washing your hands. You saved the world!”** It's about putting these things into the correct context and - when people are not basing their predictions on evidence - holding them to account.

JT: Are people taking a more sceptical view of the media?

Yes, people are noticing the different flip-flopping stories and are becoming more sceptical, beginning to **ignore the more important health stories**

JT: Are health journalist to blame for this? Are they personally responsible?

It is not my job to advise the public and come up with the public health messages. It's up to people individually to decide what risks they want to take. I want to explain it simply enough to get the message across. One of my main aims is to present people with **“news they can use”**.

I think it probably is part of your job to educate the public about the government's policy and science more generally

Audience: In communicating the assumptions and uncertainty behind the numbers, what is the journalists job?

Although most journalists don't have a scientific or health background they can simply go and ask the scientist. However if the scientist can't explain it simply to me I'm not going to be able to communicate it to the public

It's about being able to ask the simple questions and not being afraid of looking stupid



Dr Sile Lane

Public Liaison for charity Sense About Science

KEY QUESTIONS

- How should journalists present uncertainty, risk and unproven data?
- How can journalists bring out complexity behind the stories without confusing and boring your audience?
- Should we have a few more science graduates in the media?

Chaired by **Jacqui Thornton**

