

The press release is not the *paper*

One mechanism of institutional communication — why the announcement about a study routinely claims more than the study found, and where the exaggeration enters.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to the way institutions communicate — press releases, official statements, guidance documents, corrections, embargoes — the packaging between a record and the public, examined the same way regardless of which institution or which side it favors. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with primary documents, regulations, and nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS — INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

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Press Release vs. the Study

Praeco Non Auctor

Governing precedent / case Sumner et al., BMJ 2014 Status Recurring across science and policy news

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

UNIVERSITY AND AGENCY PRESS OFFICES

*A landmark study in the BMJ examined health science news and traced the exaggeration back to its source: much of it originated not with journalists but in the **university press release**. Where a release overstated a finding, the news usually did too; where the release was careful, so was the coverage. Press offices compete for attention, so a cautious “associated with” in the paper can become “causes” in the release, and a mouse study can become advice for people — before a single reporter is involved.*

THE HOOK

The release and the paper carry the same logo and topic, so readers assume the announcement faithfully reflects the research.

THE MECHANISM

Press offices summarize for impact, not peer review. Exaggeration measurably enters at the release stage and propagates into coverage; the paper's own claims are usually narrower.

Field mark: before trusting a study headline, find the paper itself — the exaggeration usually lives in the press release, and the paper's actual claim is narrower and hedged.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

PEER-REVIEWED STUDY · BMJ

Sumner P, et al. “The association between exaggeration in health related science news and academic press releases.” *BMJ* 2014;349:g7015.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g7015>

Traced exaggeration in health news back to the originating university press releases, not to journalists.

REFERENCE

Association of American Medical Colleges / university communications guidelines on accurate research promotion.

<https://www.aamc.org/>

Professional guidance urging press offices to match releases to the study's actual claims.

Reading a Study Headline: A Gut Check

four questions before an announcement about research becomes what you believe it found

1 Find the paper

The release is marketing; the paper is the evidence. Read the abstract.

2 Check the verb

‘Associated with’ in the paper often becomes ‘causes’ in the release.

3 Check the subject

Cells or mice in the study can become people in the release.

4 Look for the hedge

Papers state limitations; releases tend to drop them.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 1 of the Institutional Communications section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins Elections, Federal Laws, and Official Data Reporting within Civics, with local government planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.

Civics Field Edition · Institutional Communications · Specimen No. 1

All specimens independently sourced