

“Linked to” became “*causes*”

One mechanism of institutional communication — how a correlational finding is upgraded to a causal claim in the announcement, and why the study usually did not say that.

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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'Study Shows' — Association as Causation

Nexus Non Causa

Governing precedent / case Correlation-to-causation upgrade in releases

Status Recurring in health and social-science news

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

PRESS RELEASES AND 'STUDY SHOWS' HEADLINES

*Most observational studies can establish that two things move together, not that one causes the other — the paper says “associated with,” “linked to,” “correlated.” The release, and then the headline, upgrade this to **causal language**: “X causes Y,” “doing X will lower your Y.” The same BMJ line of research that traced exaggeration to press offices found causal overstatement of correlational results to be one of its most common forms. The tell is a directive: a real causal claim would need an experiment the study rarely ran.*

THE HOOK

A causal headline is actionable and shareable, so it beats the study's hedged ‘associated with.’

THE MECHANISM

Observational data show association; causation requires design (randomization, or strong causal inference). The release swaps correlational verbs for causal ones the study cannot support.

Field mark: when a headline says an action ‘causes’ or ‘prevents’ something, check whether the study was an experiment or an observation — observational studies show association, and the release usually did the upgrading.

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., *BMJ* 2014;349:g7015 — causal claims from correlational studies in press releases.

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

Documents overstatement of correlational findings as causal as a leading form of press-release exaggeration.

REFERENCE

U.S. National Library of Medicine / statistics education on correlation vs. causation.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>

Standard explanation of why observational association does not establish cause.

Reading a 'Study Shows' Headline: A Gut Check

four questions before 'X causes Y' changes what you do

- 1 Read the verb**
'Associated with' is not 'causes.'
 - 2 Ask the design**
Was it a randomized experiment or an observation?
 - 3 Beware the directive**
'Do X to prevent Y' is a causal claim needing causal evidence.
 - 4 Trace to the paper**
The upgrade usually happened in the release, not the study.
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INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 6 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. 6

All specimens independently sourced