

'Spin' in media reports of scientific articles

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Press releases and news stories reporting the results of randomized controlled trials often contain "spin"—specific reporting strategies (intentional or unintentional) emphasizing the beneficial effect of the experimental treatment—but such "spin" frequently comes from the abstract (summary) of the actual study published in a scientific journal, rather than being related to misinterpretation by the media, according to French researchers writing in this week's *PLOS Medicine*.

"Spinning" the reporting of clinical trials could give physicians and patients unrealistic expectations about new treatments. It is important to know the source of "spin" and so French researchers, led by Isabelle Boutron from the Université Paris Descartes, looked for the presence of "spin" in a sample of 70 press releases, and 41 associated news stories, of [randomized controlled trials](#) and investigated the source of the "spin".

The authors found that 33 (47%) of press releases contained "spin" and also identified "spin" in the conclusions of 28 (40%) study abstracts published in [scientific journals](#). Furthermore, 21 (51%) of the associated news stories were reported with "spin", mainly the same type of "spin" as those identified in the press release and article abstract conclusions. Importantly, "spin" could lead readers to overestimate the benefits of the treatment.

The authors conclude: "Our results highlight a tendency for press releases and the associated media coverage of randomized controlled trials to place emphasis on the beneficial effects of experimental treatments. This tendency is probably related to the presence of "spin" in

conclusions of the [scientific article](#)'s abstract. "

They continue: "Our work highlights that this inappropriate reporting could bias readers' interpretation of research results."

The authors add: "Consequently, reviewers and editors of published articles have an important role to play in the dissemination of research findings and should be particularly aware of the need to ensure that the conclusions reported are an appropriate reflection of the trial findings and do not overinterpret or misinterpret the results."

More information: Yavchitz A, Boutron I, Bafeta A, Marroun I, Charles P, et al. (2012) Misrepresentation of Randomized Controlled Trials in Press Releases and News Coverage: A Cohort Study. PLoS Med 9(9): e1001308. [doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001308](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001308)

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