

M. JOSEPH/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY



## Mutant flu — the view from the newsroom

When reporters aren't given the facts, they are likely to jump to the most extreme conclusions, says David Brown.

When the federal building in Oklahoma City was bombed in 1995 by antigovernment terrorists, the newspaper I write for, *The Washington Post*, ran a story about how easy it was to make a bomb from nitrogenous fertilizer and motor oil. The paper's editors had debated over whether they should run the story, and whether it should be put on the website — which was very new — thereby rendering it easily accessible forever. They decided to put it up.

A lot of dangerous information is now within a few key strokes of the reading public. We hear that all the information needed to make a nuclear weapon is on the Internet (although I am not competent to judge). The base sequences of the Spanish flu, smallpox and polio viruses are publicly available. So how should we in the press view the debate over whether or not *Nature* and *Science* should have been free to publish research on mutant flu viruses? Covering it as a news story has raised many interesting issues, and that is unlikely to change with the publication of one of the papers by *Nature* (M. Imai *et al.* *Nature* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nature10831>; 2012).

The concerns that reporters and newspaper editors have as they approach a story are not necessarily the same that scientists, journal editors, guardians of public health and government officials have. But there is a lot of overlap.

The first and most obvious point is that journalists' sources of knowledge are what they see, what they read and what they are told. We have no special channels. The debate over how to publish these two papers illustrates what happens when two of these sources are missing. We had no events to observe and as long as the papers remained secret we could not read them. What we were left with is what people had told us.

In my experience, scientists are more capable of giving a disinterested version of events than, say, politicians. They are willing to present both sides more or less fairly. They tend to have a respect for facts, wherever they lead, which cannot be said of lots of people who make up the voices on the news. But their general goodwill can't make up for the fact that what they told reporters about the mutant-flu controversy was woefully inadequate. The news stories that appeared were based on second- and third-hand versions of the facts. There was no evidence base for reporters to consult. And without numbers and details — the evidence base for science reporting — you get qualitative statements and metaphors. "Doomsday virus", for example.

Many reporters, it should be noted, are enthusiastic participants in overstating the case. Some learn early to make the most extreme assertions supportable by the facts even if the impression left by their story is not what one would get after a complete survey of the facts. Editors sometimes goad reporters in that direction, but generally that's not necessary.

➔ **NATURE.COM**  
Discuss this article  
online at:  
[go.nature.com/pmc9nn](http://go.nature.com/pmc9nn)

It may turn out that in some circumstances, censorship is the responsible act because the facts are too dangerous to provide to the readers. But when that happens, I think you can count on getting an extreme account in the press of what is being kept secret.

Secrecy breeds paranoia. It makes people question motives. I haven't read any paranoid explanations of why this research was kept secret. But if this starts to become a habit with dual-use research, I am sure they will emerge. Conspiracy theories have a corrosive effect on democracy. They also have particular resonance in minority communities, which tend to distrust motives, and arguably science, more than society as a whole.

Secrecy also puts the press in the awkward position of delivering a message that it can't judge the credibility of, a message that says: "This information is too dangerous for all but a few experts to know — at least that's what they are telling us."

Very little is as viscerally repellant to reporters as being forced to say something like that. Nobody wants to be played for a patsy. When reporters find themselves in the position of having to write an incomplete story, they may start to question the motives and competence of the people delivering the scraps of information. (Newspapers can, however, keep secrets when they need to, such as when their own reporters are kidnapped in war zones.)

Secrecy is difficult to maintain. When the H5N1 story broke, I suggested to my editor that the newspaper might want to see if one of our computer experts could find the censored

papers in the digital cloud. We were not, of course, prepared to do any hacking to find them. But even the suggestion of searching for them made people in the newsroom very uncomfortable. "It just doesn't feel right," said one of the editors. "What are we going to do if we find them?" There was so much ambivalence that the idea just died. But if even what some people like to call the 'elite' media have compunctions about making dangerous information public, or about rooting around for it, then I don't think emerging forms will have a similar reluctance.

I am glad that the research papers are to be published in full. Attempted secrecy swims against the tide of history. For better or worse — and I think most people would say for better — paternalism has been rejected in medicine and is being challenged in other spheres, such as education policy. People expect to be able to make up their own minds, even about things they don't understand. The press should be a vehicle to help people make these decisions. ■ [SEE EDITORIAL P.6](#)

David Brown is a reporter at The Washington Post. This article is adapted from a talk originally given at the Royal Society in London. e-mail: [browndm@washpost.com](mailto:browndm@washpost.com)