Defending the Indefensible

Deconstructing a New York Times Headline

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How does a *New York Times* reporter justify a grossly misleading headline on a story of major importance?

Usually we could only speculate, but in one recent case, thanks to a health advocate's persistence, we have a peek at the rationalizations and distortions in play.

This is the *Times* headline at issue:

> ***Study of Cellphone Risks Finds 'Some Evidence' of Link to Cancer, at Least in Male Rats***

It sits at the top of a story by William Broad, a staff writer, reporting the release of the National Toxicology Program's (NTP) final report on its $30 million, ten-year animal study of the cancer risks associated with cell phone radiation.

The quotation marks are important. They indicate that "some evidence" is a term of art and they imply that the study fell short of providing definitive evidence of a cancer risk. If that had been the case, the term "clear evidence" would have applied.

But that was the finding. The NTP saw clear evidence that cell phone radiation causes cancer and said so in its press release.

Theodora Scarato, the executive director of the Environmental Health Trust (EHT), wrote a series of emails to Broad and kept writing until he replied. Among her many questions was: Why did the headline refer to "some" rather than "clear" evidence of cancer?

In his reply, Broad maintained that he saw nothing wrong with the headline. Here's what he told her:

> "The vital context for this discussion is that our article focused on brain tumors because that's what readers

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2010 Articles
2009 Articles
2008 Articles
2007 Articles
2006 Articles
2005 Articles
2004 Articles

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> worry about. Naturally, people hold cell phones to their heads, not to their hearts (unlike the rats in the study, which had no choice but to be irradiated over their entire bodies). I see nothing here to correct. We detailed the various findings of the study exactly as you report them: 'some evidence' of brain cancer versus 'clear evidence' of heart cancer. Again, we gave priority in the article to the brain-tumor issue because that has become a major topic of concern to consumers."

Broad, a veteran science reporter, would have us believe that he tailored his write-up to tell people what they want to know. But the NTP story was not that the rats got brain cancer or even that they got malignant tumors in their hearts. The key finding was that they got cancer. A responsible headline would have read, *Cell Phone Radiation Causes Cancer.*

Decades of Denial

I have been following the electromagnetic radiation cancer story for 40 years, since well before cell phones were on the scene. Over that entire time the suggestion that any type of non-ionizing radiation (EMF or RF) can cause cancer has been met with something close to ridicule.

Even John Bucher, the head of the NTP cell phone project, predicted *before* the experiment began that it would come to nothing. He was just going through the motions because that was the right thing to do.

Broad himself has long promoted the idea that EMF/RF links to cancer is junk science. Close to 30 years ago, he branded Paul Brodeur's book*, Currents of Death,* "alarmist," going so far as to put Brodeur's thesis on a par with "asserting the earthly presence of space aliens." Broad's line of argument became more difficult a few years later when the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) judged EMFs to be a possible human carcinogen.

Broad's assertion that he's putting the reader first is doubly specious because the tumors in the hearts and brains of the NTP rats are in the same type of cells. *They are the same cancers, just in different organs.* (For more on this, see our "More Than a Coincidence.") That crucial commonality should have been brought into the open instead of being tucked under the rug. Broad missed the opportunity —indeed neglected his duty— to inform readers of the *Times* of the potential risks.

Broad told Scarato that his article addressed the issue of "some evidence" of brain cancer versus "clear evidence" of heart cancer. That's true, but only at the bottom of a 19-paragraph story, and even there only indirectly, in the context of an FDA statement that tried to disavow the entire NTP enterprise.

And finally, there's the "at least in male rats" qualifier in the headline. It discounts the study's relevance to human health, dismissing one of the central canons of toxicology without explanation.

Broad's headline might well have been: "Don't Worry, This Is Just Another Cell Phone Study."

NTP, New York Times, William Broad, cell phones (media), cell phones cancer, John Bucher, Theodora Scarato,

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