

**UWE Bristol**



## Who Can You Trust? Deciphering Decline in Trust of Government-sponsored Sources of Health Information

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## Declining trust

- Government seen as more credible than commercial sources
- BUT
- Significantly less trusted in last 30 years
- Health sector is not immune
- - decreased confidence in public health risk communication
- Lower trust in public health experts



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## Role of the Media

- Assumption that media accurately and uncritically give medical 'facts'
- Yet evidence of:
  - Sensationalism
  - Amplification of risk
  - Emphasis on emotional aspects (individual cases)
  - Speculation on worst-case scenarios
- Editorial may not be in line with expert opinion / public interest

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## Example: MMR Vaccine (1)

- 1998: Wakefield et al suggested link between measles, mumps and rubella combined vaccine and autism.
- Vaccination rates fell from 92% to 80% - and as low as 50% in some areas.
- Decline highest among socially advantaged – most active information seekers.
- News reports sensationalised paper 'findings' and potential risk.

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## MMR Vaccine (2)

- Media reported GPs were advising parents not to have children vaccinated with MMR
- Reinforced perceptions of problems with the MMR vaccine
- Overall loss of confidence in vaccine safety and credibility of government advice.
  
- Subsequent studies refuted Wakefield et al.'s speculative link – but these were not reported widely in the media.



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## Public Trust Erosion Occurs When:

- Experts disagree over risk factors
- Media to focus on controversy
- Media scrutiny intensifies in a perceived crisis
- Government reassurances failed to convince
- Widespread belief that health professionals are biased



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## Memories of 'Mad Cow'?

- Collective memory of the government handling of the 1990s Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), (mad-cow disease) crisis
- Government officials initially refused to accept that BSE could be transmitted to humans
- Lack of urgency in policy development, implementation and communication of risk to the public.



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## Memories of 'Mad Cow' Revisited

- Recent media headlines:
  - Government vCJD death figures 'manipulated' (BBC News, 20/03/2010)
  - Hospital blunder puts 38 patients at risk of human form of Mad Cow disease (Mirror, [30/03/2011](#))



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## Sample Media Headlines

- Vitamin D deficiency linked to high risk of dementia
- Rickets warning from doctors as Vitamin D deficiency widens
- In tests, Vitamin D shrinks breast cancer cells
- Low Vitamin D levels tied to incontinence
- Kids with type 1 diabetes lack vitamin D

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## Conflicting Advice Regarding Sun Protection Factors

- Information about sun protection and skin cancer is largely passively acquired via consumer media.
- Elaboration Likelihood model: low involvement, peripheral effects (perceived quality of presentation / source effects) important.
- Decisions made to simply accept / reject the message without any investment of thought or deliberation.
- Conflict with prevailing norms, unlikely to be persuasive

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