Media Advisory

Health in the Headlines. The Stories Behind the Stories. STEPHEN KLAIDMAN. Oxford University Press, New York, 1992. viii, 249 pp., illus. $24.95.

President Bush's recent statements urging Americans to lower their health risks confirm the hold exerted by preventive medicine today. Yet how does anyone gather information about which risks are best avoided and which are tolerable? One candidate is the news, the focus of this book by journalist and ethicist Stephen Klaidman. Through seven case studies—contamination of food by the pesticide EDB, radon, nuclear power, global warming, AIDS, cholesterol, and the linkage of cigarette smoking to lung cancer—Klaidman depicts the complicated and varied ways in which politicians, journalists, physicians, scientists, and (occasionally) citizens move the scientific question of risk into the public and political space of the news.

Refreshingly, this is not a book in which the author berates journalists for oversimplifying the complexities and nuances of scientific inquiry and scientists for stooping to "sell" their findings to the general public. Instead Klaidman, who is well aware of the difficulties of health journalism and also sees the many benefits of simplicity for communicating risks to the public, adeptly traces the impacts from outside journalism on health news. He suggests that the media are best understood as a battlefield, with an instrumental rather than a participatory role, and in light of the inevitable constraints on reporting he includes some valuable tips to help the audience decode health news.

I am not as willing as Klaidman to let journalism off the hook. His accounts provide numerous examples of reporters becoming advocates for particular scientific positions. Sometimes they are convinced of the veracity of one side, as in Jane Brody's crusade in the *New York Times* on the dangers of cholesterol for otherwise healthy individuals. More commonly, reporters unwittingly gravitate toward particular sources and storylines because of the built-in, seemingly neutral definitions of newsworthiness. Since journalists generally agree upon such rules of thumb, the news as a whole is far from unbiased.

Klaidman is reluctant to generalize from his seven cases, but they do clearly show which health risks have and which have not made news. Given that journalists have limited resources to explore a complex topic and must come up with a fresh daily quantity of news, it is not surprising that they usually rely upon sources "in a position to know," usually governmental officials or industry spokespersons, to create newsworthy events, as by press conferences to announce new findings. It is worth noting that sources with the most access to the press do not always have the most reliable evidence; contrast the easy access of the smoking industry's scientific experts with the near-blackout of gay activists at the start of the AIDS crisis. Alternatively, reporters await accidents that reveal unanticipated risks. But here, finding the apparently most clear-cut, immediate, and easily described possible threats to the lowest-common-denominator "general public" results in oddities, as in the early '80s when several cyanide-laced Tylenols occasioned more coverage than the early phases of the AIDS epidemic, apparently limited to isolated groups. Above all, as Klaidman has noted in previous writings, the journalistic passion for hard-and-fast factuality makes risk assessment into a far less tentative business than it actually is, given how scientific admissions of unknowability call the very enterprise of the news into question.

At his best, Klaidman reveals the unpredictable snowball effects of the interactions among political actors, journalists, and scientists, all with their own agendas and concerns. A particular gem is his description of how two entrepreneurial young senators in search of catchy "new ideas" pushed NASA scientist James Hansen toward ever more dramatic statements on global warming; journalists in turn downplayed the leaps of inference underlying Hansen's statements in order to get the headlines and lead the news. Yet Klaidman ends up hedging his bets on today's interpenetration of politics and science. Given that the scientific sources most relied upon, such as the Surgeon General or the director of NIH, are simultaneously scientists and political appointees and that medical and scientific research is extraordinarily dependent on government financing, how helpful is Klaidman's admonition (p. 232), "Do not confuse politically motivated characterizations of health risks with science?"

As Klaidman argues, journalistic effects are crucial not merely because the public relies upon the news for risk assessment but because the media establish a context in which political and scientific decisions about risk and health take place. But Klaidman unfortunately stops short of discussing how the media affect the very process of science itself. Scientists themselves have a stake in the news coverage of their objects of study, which could affect not just public awareness but their ability to garner the resources necessary to continue doing science. Likewise, as a recent study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* revealed, scientific attention to findings, as measured by journal citations, is sensitive to the press coverage thereof. Little wonder, then, that scientists and physicians devote increasing energy to managing their press in order to gain favorable publicity not just with the public but among their peers, to downplay dissent and to shore up their own authority against challenges inside and outside of science. In the wake of AIDS activism and patients' rights, these disputes should become increasingly public, and the interconnections of science, politics, and the news should only grow stronger. Thus, instead of Klaidman's unconvincing separation of politics and science in health news, perhaps we would be better off with his later advice (p. 234), "Assume that there are no disinterested parties."

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Questions about Parasitism

Parasite-Host Associations. Coexistence or Conflict? CATHERINE A. TOFT, ANDRÉ AESCHLIMANN, and LIANA BOLIS, Eds. Oxford University Press, New York, 1991. x, 384 pp., illus. $72. From a congress.

Parasites, *sensu latissimo*, include not only the microorganisms (microparasites) and animals (macroparasites) of traditional parasitology but also plant pathogens and even many herbivorous insects. The literature on herbivore-plant interactions, with which I am most familiar, is largely divorced from the literature on parasitology, but many of the same ecological and evolutionary questions apply to both kinds of interactions. Among these are whether or not parasites limit host population densities and whether or not the associations are demographically stable. The evolutionary questions revolve around concepts of coevolution. Do parasites and hosts engage in indefinitely escalated "arms races?" Do these frequently lead to