

## Mediawatch

### Political science

Richard F. Harris

Years ago, reporters and journal editors made a deal. Journals would share their publications in advance of the release date in exchange for a promise by reporters to withhold publication until an agreed-upon date. This ‘embargo’ arrangement was reached so that journalists wouldn’t rush to their mailboxes and scramble to put out stories based on only the most cursory reading of the material.

That kind of agreement was sorely needed in early January. The *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* published four papers and an editorial — 34 pages in all — on new data and a new theory about the cause of ailments among veterans of the Persian Gulf War. The papers were unusually dense, and some employed methodologies unfamiliar even to epidemiologists. The conclusions were controversial. So was the study’s sponsor: eccentric Texas billionaire Ross Perot.

And the journal broke with tradition. On this occasion, science journalists were not given the material in advance. Instead, *JAMA*’s Editor George Lundberg stood beside the principal investigators as they released their report at a news conference in Washington DC, a week in advance of the publication date. Reporters had just a few minutes to glance at this avalanche of data before getting a chance to ask the scientists about their work.

What’s more, the day before this news conference, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa held one of his own to announce the results of one of the papers — a telephone survey of Iowa Gulf War veterans. He couldn’t offer the assembled reporters actual results of the survey. Instead, they were shown posters of the results, with numbers clumsily inked in by hand.

Forget error bars. When pressed to provide the actual study, Harkin blamed *JAMA* for refusing to share it.

Harkin had directed the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct this study, and as one annoyed reporter quipped at the news conference, the senator seemed determined to see his face on the nightly news. Also present was an obviously chagrined head of the Centers for Disease Control, David Satcher, who was made even more uncomfortable by having to disagree publicly with his patron about the significance of this massive survey.

Welcome to Washington, where the phrase ‘political science’ clearly has more than one meaning.

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George Lundberg had lifted the embargo because he thought it was likely to be broken anyway, but it meant that reporters had no time to seek advice. Once they had the *JAMA* studies in hand, simply faxing them to experts in the field for comment took over half an hour. Asking scientists to read and digest them before a news deadline was out of the question. Instead, most reporters relied heavily upon what was said at the carefully orchestrated news conference.

“The diverse group of physical complaints known as ‘Gulf War syndrome’ may be six distinct patterns of symptoms, some of which appear associated with specific combinations of chemical exposures soldiers may have encountered,” began the story in the *Washington Post*. “The elusive Gulf War syndrome was caused by combinations of usually harmless chemicals . . . according to new research,” wrote Paul Richter of the *Los Angeles Times*. *USA Today*’s headline declared, “New data back Gulf vets’ claims.”

The only notes of caution came from Philip Landrigan, who wrote the accompanying editorial in *JAMA*, and from a Pentagon spokesman,

who may not be regarded as unbiased in such matters.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* did manage to phone John Bailar, an epidemiologist who headed an Institute of Medicine study of Gulf War illnesses. Bailar hadn’t time to read the articles, of course, but he did tell the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: “we are at present very skeptical of the first unconfirmed report of yet one more hypothesis.” Bailar had much stronger words a few days later, once he’d had a chance to read the papers. He told me he was surprised that any reputable journal would have published the work, given its major methodological weaknesses. Of course, by then the studies were old news, and news organizations weren’t expending any more effort on the story.

Reporters rushing to deadline had little chance to weigh the significance of the funding source, Ross Perot. He gave the money to the researchers while he was barnstorming the nation, telling voters that he knew how to solve problems better than the federal government did. The main author (and funding recipient), Robert Haley, was determined in the news conference to declare that illness from the Gulf War is “real” and not due to stress. Lundberg felt compelled to interject that stress-related illnesses are quite “real,” too, though that’s a very unpopular sentiment among ailing veterans.

There was one saving grace in this episode. The *New York Times*’ usual ‘Gulf War syndrome’ reporter, Philip Shenon, was on vacation when the study broke. Shenon has handled this topic with a conspiratorial tone, often suggesting that the Pentagon’s admitted bungling of chemical-weapons exposure data equates to a cover-up of the real cause of Gulf War illnesses. For a change, the *JAMA* story was handled very soberly by the *New York Times*’ science reporter in Washington.

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