

# Telegraph science editor Sarah Knapton puts the record straight. Not really.

written by Clive Bates | 12 August 2016



One irresponsible scientist said this - enough for a headline at The Telegraph

I was recently contacted by Sarah Knapton, Science Editor at the Daily Telegraph, asking me to set the record straight on the criticism she had received following an article on vaping, not least on this site from me. There had been a formal complaint about her article, and she was asking me to publish the result - complaint rejected. In the post below, I publish the IPSO findings (as she requested) and the email exchange that followed, which I hope puts these findings in context.

## Introduction

Do you remember the December 2015 cell-study story from the US in which a scientist claimed there was no difference in risk between smoking and vaping? The Science Editor of The Telegraph, Sarah Knapton, wrote it up [E-cigarettes are no safer than smoking tobacco, scientists warn](#) - generating the headline above. One of the scientists involved had said:

*Based on the evidence to date I believe they are no better than smoking regular cigarettes*

Prof Jessica Wang-Rodriquez, University of California

This being obviously dangerous nonsense, I wrote about it here: [Credulous or cynical? Science journalists played yet again by e-cigarette pseudoscience and spin](#), including an open letter to Sarah Knapton expressing concerns about this reporting. Others went further and complained to the to the [Independent Press Standards Organisation](#) (IPSO) - see [the complaint](#) from leading academics in the field Gerry Stimson, Linda Bauld, Lynne Dawkins, Peter Hajek and David Nutt.

Anyway, Ms Knapton has been back in touch. On 1 August 2016, she emailed to ask if I would publish the IPSO response, rejecting the complaint. I am of course happy to do that, but also the exchange that followed. You can draw your own conclusions.

## Exchange of e-mails

Here's her opening email.

*On 1 August 2016 at 09:55, sarah knapton wrote:*

*Clive,*

*As people are still quoting your blog about my vaping article perhaps you would like to include the Ipsos ruling on it. (Although I suspect you won't)*

*Sarah*

Knapton then includes the IPSO email sent to Gerry Stimson et al telling them the complaint won't proceed. This is what she wishes me to publish, so here it is in full.

*Dear*

*I write further to our earlier email regarding your complaint about an article headlined "E-cigarettes are no safer than smoking tobacco, scientists warn", published by the Daily Telegraph on 29 December 2015.*

*On receipt of a complaint, IPSO's Executive staff reviews it to ensure that it falls within our remit, and represents a possible breach of the Editors' Code of Practice. The Executive has now completed an assessment of your complaint under the terms of the Code. Having considered the points you have raised in full, we have concluded that your complaint does not raise a possible breach of*

*the Code.*

*You said that it was misleading for the headline to state that scientists had warned that “e-cigarettes are no safer than smoking tobacco”, because this was not a finding of the study in question. The article explained that Dr Jessica Wang-Rodriguez, a lead researcher of the study, took the view that it “strongly suggest[ed] that electronic cigarettes are not as safe as their marketing makes them appear”, and that “based on the evidence to date, [she] believe[s] they are no better than smoking regular cigarettes”. While we note that you disagree with the Dr Wang-Rodriguez’s position on the findings of the study, the newspaper was entitled to report her views on the matter, and made clear her basis for her position. The article clearly attributed these views to Dr Wang-Rodriguez, and did not claim that the study itself found that e-cigarettes were less safe than regular smoking. In the context of an article which accurately reported the findings of the study, we did not consider that it was significantly misleading to summarise Dr Wang-Rodriguez’s position in the headline. This aspect of your complaint did not therefore raise a breach of Clause 1.*

*We noted, in any case, that the article made clear the contentious nature of the subject of the study, and that “scientists and health officials are divided” over the safety of e-cigarettes. Further, it included a statement from Public Health England making clear their position that e-cigarettes were safer than regular cigarettes, and from Action on Smoking and Health’s making clear that the research did not “compare the impact of electronic cigarette vapour with that of tobacco smoke, which is far more toxic ... than vapour”.*

*You were also concerned that it was misleading for the article to omit reference to the study’s findings relating to cells exposed to regular cigarette smoke. We should explain that the selection of material for publication is however a matter of editorial discretion. Publications have the editorial freedom to make such selections provided that they do not raise breaches of the Editors’ Code. In this instance, and in the context of an article published for a non-specialist readership, the omission of the exact details relating to the control groups and specific cell lines in the study did not render the article as a whole significantly inaccurate, misleading or otherwise distorted, given that the article accurately reported the central findings of the study. This aspect of your complaint did not therefore raise a possible breach of Clause 1.*

*You are entitled to request that the Executive's decision to reject your complaint be reviewed by IPSO's Complaints Committee. To do so you will need to write to us within seven days, setting out the reasons why you believe the decision should be reviewed. Please note that we are unable to accept requests for review made more than seven days following the date of this email.*

*We would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to consider the points you have raised, and have shared this correspondence with the newspaper to make it aware of your concerns.*

*Best wishes,*

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*Cc Daily Telegraph  
Sarah Knapton  
Science Editor  
The Daily Telegraph*

Her opener was a bit rude, I thought, but I'd not want to deny her a response to criticism. The decision from IPSO points out that she has *accurately quoted* someone. That the person, Wang-Rodriguez, happened to be talking utter rubbish and [subsequently changed her statement](#) is of no consequence apparently.

A challenge based on the *accuracy* requirement of the [IPSO Editors' Code](#) draws on this rule:

*The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.*

You can see that a challenge might not work if the inaccuracy had been provided by a third party, then accurately reported - though I think there is a reasonable case to argue here that the headline is highly misleading, by virtue of the journalistic/editorial decision to base an article on this deranged quote and then make a headline of it.

However, rather than pursue that I wanted to make the point about the *ethics* of this approach. So I write back...

*On 5 August 2016 at 11:49, Clive Bates wrote:*

*Dear Sarah*

*Apologies for the delay in replying, I've been working on unrelated things.*

*Of course I will show your response - and I don't know why you might suspect I won't. All I did was write you two polite letters to which your only reply was to block me on Twitter. Can you point me to a link on the IPSO site to the complaints and response, as I couldn't find this. I didn't even know there had been an IPSO case.*

*I do realise you literally quoted someone, and did this accurately. But IPSO's exoneration on accuracy grounds is not an exoneration on ethical grounds. The journalistic ethics of quoting someone who is obviously wrong (and who corrected herself subsequently) are pretty weak. You knew or should have known that this was complete rubbish from a scientific point of view - and 1 minute of checking would have confirmed that. It's not much different to putting wild statements from anti-vaxxers, homeopaths or other snake-oil purveyors into headlines. But it is certainly true that an extremist from California said said something extreme, evidence-free and irresponsible, designed to create sensational reporting from gullible or cynical hacks.*

*To me the real story is why Wang Rodriguez is apparently unaccountable for statements like this that can cause harm once repeated in the media. At least her local paper, [the San Diego Union Tribune](#), didn't just take it face value. Maybe there's a lesson there.*

*Clive*

*Clive Bates*

**She seems to have taken offence...**

*On 5 August 2016 at 12:58, sarah knapton wrote:*

*You just can't help being offensive can you?*

*Sarah Knapton*

*Science Editor*

I admit I was surprised and concerned that I may have been misunderstood. So I wrote back with a more thorough explanation for my concern, drawing on the ASH survey of perceptions of risk.

On 5 August 2016 at 13:06, Clive Bates wrote:

Dear Sarah

You seem easily offended - what are you offended by?

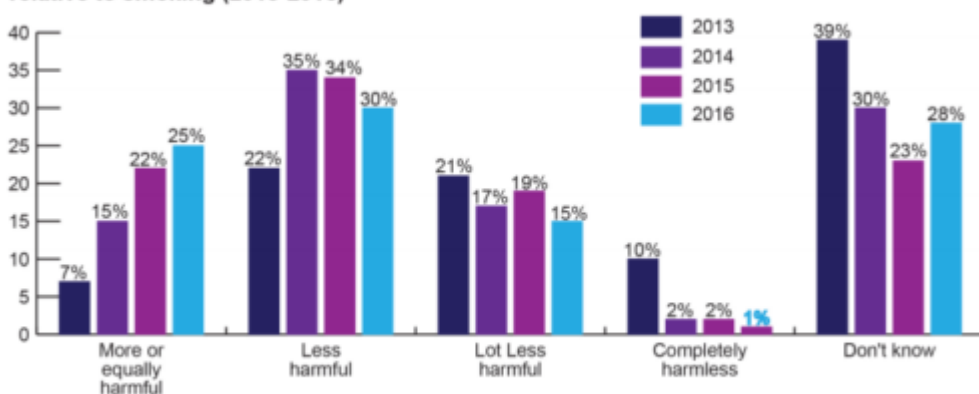
Actually, I'm being completely serious. Maybe you don't see why someone taking a public health perspective might feel strongly about the ethics of this type of reporting.

My concern is about the origins of well-documented misconceptions about the relative risks of vaping and smoking. If people don't think there is any difference, or it is trivial, they may well continue to smoke instead of switching to vaping and ultimately suffer an agonising fatal illness as a result.

Reporting that exaggerates risks can play a causal role in that, and in my view that is as bad as the corporate behaviour of the tobacco companies 30 years ago. There's little logical or ethical difference between playing down the risks of smoking to help sell cigarettes by creating false reassurance and playing up the risks of vaping to sell more internet advertising by creating false alarm.

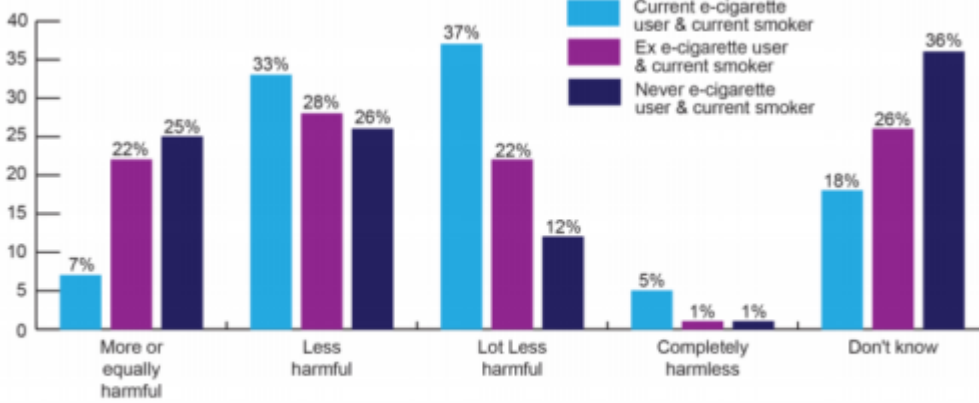
So what role do you think your reporting has played in creating these [harmful and deteriorating misconceptions](#)?

Figure 6: Adult population perception of harm from e-cigarettes relative to smoking (2013-2016)



Unweighted base: All GB adults who have heard of e-cigarettes - 2013, n=8936; 2014, n=11,307; 2015 n=11,340; 2016 n=11,489

**Figure 7: Perception of harms from electronic cigarettes relative to smoking among current smokers (2016)**



Unweighted base: GB adult current e-cigarette user and current smoker (n=330), GB adult ex e-cigarette user & current smoker (n=703), GB adult never e-cigarette user and current smoker (n=606)

*The only realistic answer on these charts is 'lot less harmful' (see [Royal College of Physicians](#)) so I basically regard these figures as a public health scandal, though I recognise they are not solely down to you.*

*Regards*

*Clive Bates*

She responds asserting that I am not taking the evidence of harm seriously.

*On 5 August 2016 at 14:52, sarah knapton wrote:*

*You seem happy to ignore all the evidence that suggests vaping can be harmful and is a gateway drug. There is plenty of it. But I noticed the actions of vaping trolls has caused somewhat of a chilling effect of late.*

*Sarah Knapton*

*Science Editor*

*The Daily Telegraph*

As I do take it *very* seriously, I replied with a defence to this hurtful allegation.

*On 5 August 2016 at 15:26 Clive Bates wrote*

*Dear Sarah,*

*You didn't say what you were offended by or whether you think the misalignment of risk perceptions and reality are in any part your responsibility.*

*I don't ignore any evidence, but I don't uncritically buy everything posing as evidence either.*

*There is no credible evidence anywhere that vaping is a gateway drug to smoking, even if there are authors and activists who make this claim about studies that simply don't have the methodology to show it. If you'd like to investigate this argument more completely, you can read my blog post on it: [How not to be duped by gateway effect claims](#). It was written with journalists in mind in advance of yet another study making specious claims.*

*If you can show me where I have ever said that vaping is 'harmless', I'll concede your point. The relevant issue is how much less harmful than smoking. I support the careful formulation used by the Royal College of Physicians in its [April 2016 report](#):*

*"Although it is not possible to precisely quantify the long-term health risks associated with e-cigarettes, the available data suggest that they are unlikely to exceed 5% of those associated with smoked tobacco products, and may well be substantially lower than this figure". (Section 5.5 page 87)*

*This seems to do all the right things: it acknowledges non-zero risk, provides a useful evidence-based anchor for consumer risk perception that is grounded in toxicology studies, it acknowledges uncertainty in both directions, but it indicates that the risks are likely lower than 5% and therefore that they have left a cautious margin for error. There is as of yet no sign of any material risk. If you are actually interested in this, please have a look at the review I've posted on the multiple conceptual errors found in e-cigarette studies and the reporting of them here on [PubMed Commons](#). There's a big science story here - just not the one you are interested in telling.*

*I don't know what you mean by 'vaping trolls'. As a journalist on a national title you have the means to troll millions of people at once about vaping and rarely forego the opportunity. My impression is that vapers are often abused and maligned by the sneering classes and mostly just want a truthful and insightful account of what they are doing and why or, probably, just to be left alone.*

*Regards*

*Clive Bates*



I didn't hear back after this, but I didn't want to leave things on a sour note. So I sent over some recent findings on reporting science that I think are quite insightful and relevant.

*On 11 August 2016 at 11:39 Clive Bates wrote*

*Dear Sarah,*

*I'd hate our exchange to end on a negative note, so I thought I'd send some useful things I've seen recently. I think these bear on the way this study was reported.*

**1. The BBC Trust** commissioned an [expert review on statistical reporting](#), led by the former UK National Statistician, Jil Matheson. It has seven main recommendations - three of them I think are relevant to the reporting of the study San Diego vaping study:

- *The BBC should do more to go beyond the headlines and investigate figures underlying sources. The Panel warned of the dangers of reporting statistics "straight from a press release."*
- *More should be done to ensure that all BBC presenters are able to confidently challenge misleading/inaccurate statistical claims made by interviewees.*
- *The BBC should take a more consistent approach to presenting risk, such as in reporting of health-related statistics, although the report considers that the BBC generally performs better than other broadcasters.*

**The Royal Statistical Society** [Number hygiene: a dozen rules of thumb for journalists](#) (PDF) by Professor David Spiegelhalter and David Walker

*From: [Statistics for Journalists](#), the Society's course for journalists. I thought the first rule of thumb might be relevant:*

*You come across a number in a story or press release. Buyer beware. Before making it your own, ask who cooked it up. What are their credentials? What is their pitch? Do we have alternative evidence; what numbers are they not showing us; why this number, now? If the number comes from a study or research, has anyone reputable said the work is any good?*

**3. Understanding health research - University of Glasgow and others** - comes with a tool for reviewing studies - [Understanding Health Research](#). But it has some good general resources - such as "[Useful Information](#)", gives accessible background on most useful concepts needed for appraising studies.

And they have a blog - [From medical treatment to diet and lifestyle choice: how to spot unreliable health research](#). I thought you'd appreciate this quote.

*However, critically appraising research is not just "common sense". And not knowing the right questions to ask means that anything that sounds "sciencey" can hold the same sway, regardless of its scientific merit. While many health and science journalists do great work filtering out flawed and poor quality evidence, unfortunately plenty of bad health reporting is out there, and it can cause real damage.*

*Best regards  
Clive Bates*

I don't expect I'll hear back.