

# Press releases and email notices increase local and global visibility of a small medical journal

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**Sambunjak, Dario**

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## Introduction

Visibility is an important quality of any scientific journal. It attracts contributions from authors<sup>1</sup> and increases the impact of published articles.<sup>2</sup> For small journals from the so-called scientific periphery, visibility is almost a matter of survival.<sup>3,4</sup> Studies in the USA showed that press releases (PRs) can play an important role in increasing the visibility of a scientific journal to the general public<sup>5,6</sup> and, indirectly, in the scientific community.<sup>7</sup> However, it is not clear whether the same would apply for PRs issued by small scientific journals in developing or transition countries. Even if such PRs draw the attention of local journalists, it is improbable that the media reports published in local newspapers and in non-English languages would be noticed by the global scientific community.

There are other ways to increase the international visibility of small scientific journals.<sup>3,8</sup> They can emerge from obscurity by establishing contacts and co-operation with their high-profile counterparts.<sup>3</sup> The *Croatian Medical Journal* (CMJ) had a good experience with *Journal of American Medical Association* (JAMA), which recognized the global relevance of research published in a newly emerged country like Croatia, and presented more than 25 CMJ articles in its International Abstracts sections from 1995 to 2003, when the section was discontinued. The *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) is another well-known and globally read scientific journal which reports on research articles published in other journals, including those from the scientific periphery.

In an attempt to increase its domestic and international visibility, the CMJ introduced a new media strategy of sending press releases to local journalists as well as email notices to the BMJ. We report the results of a year of implementing the strategy.

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Dario Sambunjak

Zagreb University School of Medicine

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**ABSTRACT:** *To increase its visibility among the general public and the international scientific community, the Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ), a small journal from the so-called scientific periphery, introduced a media strategy of sending press releases to journalists and email notices to the newsdesk of a high-profile international scientific journal. Subsequent news coverage and the positive response of journalists show that press releases and targeted email notices increased international visibility of articles published in a small scientific journal, and improved communication with journalists as mediators of scientific information to the general public.*

Note: An abstract of this manuscript was presented at the European Association of Science Editors 9th General Assembly and Conference, 15–18 June 2006 in Krakow, Poland.



Dario Sambunjak

## Methods

To increase the profile of the *CMJ* among the general Croatian public, we began to issue PRs regularly about the most newsworthy articles published in the *CMJ*. The articles were chosen by the *CMJ*'s press officer, who wrote PRs and sent them by email to Croatian medical and health journalists. The releases were also put on the *CMJ*'s website.

At the same time, we sent email notices to the editor of the *BMJ*'s Minerva section, which reports on the most interesting research published in international journals other than the *BMJ*. In our email notices we gave only titles and links to the full text of articles, selected by the *CMJ*'s Editor-in-Chief according to their scientific importance and worthiness.

We used a press clipping service to track down any article in the Croatian printed media published on the basis of the *CMJ*'s press releases. We also sent a short questionnaire to journalists to explore whether they receive and use the *CMJ*'s press releases, and

whether they would like to continue receiving them. The questionnaire was sent in December 2005, and served as an additional, although indirect measure of the *CMJ*'s visibility to the general public.

The number of *CMJ* articles reported in the *BMJ*'s Minerva section was determined by manual search of the journal.

## Results

During 2005, PRs on 16 articles were prepared and sent to 21 valid addresses of Croatian medical and health journalists. The press clipping service found four news articles in printed editions of Croatian daily newspapers. The articles were based on the following three PRs: 'A Third of Medical Students in Croatia Consider Leaving Country if They Don't Get Desired Specialisation', 'Pupils Have More Positive Attitudes Toward HIV-positive Children Than Their Parents' and 'Refugees Suffer From Psychosomatic and Depressive Symptoms More Often Than Soldiers'. We also accidentally found another article, first published in the

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web edition of a major Croatian daily newspaper and subsequently republished on several Internet news portals. The article was based on the PR entitled 'Fathers-to-be Who Smoke Jeopardize the Health of Their Pregnant Partners and Unborn Children'.

Twelve (57%) journalists answered the questionnaire, all of them stating that they have received the PRs and found them useful. They all wished to continue receiving PRs from the CMJ. Two radio journalists stated that they regularly used the CMJ's PRs to produce news material for their radio stations.

From December 2004 to December 2005, seven notices were sent to the BMJ's Minerva section, with a total of 46 titles and links to the CMJ articles. From January 2005 to January 2006, the following six articles from the CMJ were reported in Minerva: 'Risk of Acute Bronchospasm and Bronchial Hyperreactivity from Inhaled Acid Aerosol in Healthy Subjects: Randomized, Double-blind Controlled Trial', 'The Prevalence of Plagiarism among Medical Students', 'Psychosomatic and Depressive Symptoms in Civilians, Refugees, and Soldiers: 1993–2004 Longitudinal Study in Croatia', 'Twelve-year Experience in Identification of Skeletal Remains from Mass Graves', 'Morbidity of Native, Immigrant, and Returned Refugee Populations in Family Medicine Practice in Croatia after 1991–1995 War', and 'Pregnant Women Quit Smoking; What about Fathers? Survey Study in Bursa Region, Turkey'. The last article was reported in Minerva, although it was not mentioned in any of the email notices.

In the year before introduction of the new CMJ media strategy, no notices were sent, and Minerva reported on only one article published in the CMJ: 'Improving Control of High Blood Pressure among Middle-aged Turkish Women of Low Socio-economic Status through Public Health Training'.

### Discussion

In the first year of the new media strategy, the CMJ issued 16 PRs to journalists and sent seven email notices with a total of 46 article titles to the editor of the BMJ's Minerva section. Following these PRs and

notices, at least four news articles appeared in Croatian printed media, and six articles were reported in Minerva.

The articles that drew the most attention from Croatian journalists were epidemiological studies with implications for people's lifestyles. The only CMJ article which was reported in both Croatian media and Minerva was the one about the smoking behaviour of pregnant women and their partners in Turkey. This is in accordance with previous studies, which found articles about epidemiology or women's health to be highly newsworthy.<sup>5,9</sup>

Overall the number of news articles generated by the CMJ's PRs was small compared with the amount of media attention received by high-profile journals such as *JAMA* and *New England Journal of Medicine*.<sup>5,10</sup> This was expected, considering the limited size of Croatian media market and the fact that the CMJ, as a journal from the so-called scientific periphery, rarely publishes reports on large or 'breakthrough' trials that have a potential to significantly influence clinical practice.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the BMJ's Minerva showed noticeable interest in the CMJ's articles. Interestingly, three of six articles reported in Minerva dealt with consequences of the 1991–1995 war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which could be an indication of the medical community's interest in topics related to war and other social determinants of health.<sup>12</sup> Since its inception, which coincided with the beginning of the 1991–1995 war in Croatia, the CMJ was committed to publishing research on socio-medical aspects of war and thus developed its specific 'niche' in the global arena of scientific journals.<sup>13</sup> For a journal from the so-called scientific periphery, having a clearly defined 'niche' is crucial for attracting international attention and increasing its visibility.

The limitation of this study was a small number of journalists to whom press releases were mailed. However, our mailing list included all members of the Health and Medicine Section of the Croatian Journalist Association, so the target group was highly selected. Another limitation was that press clipping service monitored only Croatian printed media, which means that radio, tele-

*they regularly used the CMJ's PRs to produce news material for their radio stations*

vision and Internet reports were omitted, so the actual news coverage could not be determined. At least one article published in the CMJ received considerable coverage exclusively on the Internet. Positive answers from radio journalists also indicate that the visibility of the CMJ's articles among the general public following the issuing of PRs was higher than observed only by the press clipping service.

Issuing PRs is a mechanism that enhances journalists' reliance on medical journals as sources of information,<sup>14</sup> and it can be introduced as a part of strategy for increasing the visibility of a journal. The effect of press releases issued by a small scientific journal is uncertain and slow to develop, but the effort is still worthwhile because it improves communication with journalists as mediators of scientific information to the general public. Sending email notices to newsdesks of high-profile scientific journals is analogous to issuing PRs to journalists. If used with a sense of proportion, such notices can serve as an innovative way to spread the word about the articles published in the journals from the so-called scientific periphery.

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#### Dario Sambunjak

Croatian Medical Journal  
Zagreb University School of Medicine  
Salata 3  
10000 Zagreb  
Croatia  
Email: [dario.sambunjak@mef.hr](mailto:dario.sambunjak@mef.hr)

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