

Coverage of anatomical discoveries in the Dutch-speaking popular press

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INTRODUCTION

Anatomical discoveries often draw interest not only from the scientific community but also from the general public. The lay audience usually does not obtain information about these developments through the academic literature, but through the popular press. Therefore, there is an important role for popular science journalism to correctly inform the public about new advances in the field of anatomy and its subdisciplines. This means that, on one side, technical language can be transformed into information that everybody can digest, opening up research to the general public. On the other hand, there is also the risk of misrepresenting the research findings and, therefore, misinformation about the discoveries that were made.

As a small case study, the Dutch-speaking literature from Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands was searched regarding three different recent anatomical studies: (1) the description of the anterolateral ligament of the knee (Claes et al., 2013), (2) the description of the re-classification of the mesentery as an organ (Coffey and O'Leary, 2016); (3) the description of the interstitium (Benias et al., 2018). For each of these cases, a brief comparison was made between the original publication and relevant popular reports of the findings. Where relevant, academic replies by other authors are discussed.

Key words: Anatomy – Discovery – Popular – Press – Dutch

ANTEROLATERAL LIGAMENT

In 2013, Claes and colleagues published on the anatomical aspects of the anterolateral ligament situated at the knee after a cadaveric study (Claes et al., 2013). Little Dutch-language press coverage in the same year was identified. However, in 2018 the local network *TV Limburg* reported on a new type of operation on the anterior cruciate ligament that also involved the anterolateral ligament (Rondags, 2018). Here, it was mentioned that the team of Dr Bellemans discovered the ligament five years earlier. He also elaborated briefly on this discovery in an interview with *Het Laatste Nieuws* (Heylen, 2019). Perhaps due to the nature of the popular coverage of the findings, no link was made to the original publication. However, the conclusion of the findings and their clinical implications were discussed thoroughly. Less attention was given to the nature of the study itself. All reports of the finding spoke about the discovery of a new ligament, while the publication itself is more nuanced and talks about the first detailed anatomical description (Claes et al., 2013).

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MESENTERY

In 2016, Coffey and O’Leary stated that insights into anatomical and functional characteristics warranted the classification of the mesentery as an organ. This idea was further developed in 2020 (Coffey et al., 2020). This statement has been controversial and has been challenged by authors such as Neumann (2018). An article by *Gazet van Antwerpen* (MTM, 2017) reported on this publication as the discovery of a new organ of the digestive tract. Additionally, the article states that the mesentery was discovered by Da Vinci and afterwards ignored until recent times. The Flemish public broadcaster *VRT* also published an article about the publication (De Roy, 2017). This article reports about the classification of the mesentery as a new organ. An article in the *De Morgen* and *De Volkskrant* provided a critical view on the statement that a new organ was discovered and went more in depth into the specific positions (Veldhuizen, 2017a, b). The statement that the mesentery was ignored since Da Vinci is very strong and should perhaps be nuanced. Obviously, the mesentery has been the subject of research over the years (Soffers et al., 2015; Li et al., 2016). The fact that this publication convincingly showed that the mesentery should be regarded as an organ has been challenged by several authors (Neumann, 2018; Spasov et al., 2019). This information was often omitted from the popular coverage.

INTERSTITIUM

In 2018, Benias and colleagues described the macroscopic and microscopic anatomical characteristics of the interstitium. An article in *Het Nieuwsblad* explained the findings and provided insights into its applications in cancer research (ADB, 2018). The article correctly states that there was still disagreement within the scientific community whether or not the interstitium concerns an organ in its own right. A similar remark was made by *Algemeen Dagblad* (Naber, 2018). Several academic authors questioned the re-classification of the interstitium as an organ (Neumann, 2018; Mubarak, 2018). *Het Laatste Nieuws* stated that no new organ was discovered, but that its structure was elucidated (LB, 2018).

The article stated that the scientists claimed that a new organ was discovered. Interestingly, however, there is no proposal for re-classification of the interstitium as an organ in the original publication.

CONCLUSION

A few conclusions can be drawn from these observations. First of all, several of the popular press articles described the discussed findings as the discovery of new organs or the re-classification as organs of existing structures. These statements are controversial by themselves. Neumann, for example, stated that new organ discoveries in gross anatomy are unlikely (MTM, 2017). This was, however, often clarified in the articles. A second observation is that, in this case study, the popular science articles often did not refer to the original publication. Therefore, it may not be easy for readers to verify the claims made. However, lay people may not have access to the original articles, due to the need for journal subscriptions, even if they did manage to find the originals. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it is clear that a lot of the popular press coverage relating the anatomical findings explained them in lay language, and discussed potential scientific and clinical implications. Further research could be conducted to assess whether the same conclusions can be drawn from popular coverage in other languages.

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