

# Dana Foundation Blog

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## Falling Down on the Job

At Rockefeller University, the message from a Brain Awareness Week panel of four that focused on how the media communicates neuroscience and psychiatric disorders was loud and clear: vast improvement is badly needed—and there is little reason to think things will change.

Brain awareness often means delving into complex issues, and the media is programmed for sound bites rather than nuance, was the consensus. [Maia Szalavitz](#), an author and contributor to *Time's* Healthland, made the not-so-uplifting point that understaffed magazines and newspapers in a downsizing print industry often assign a single writer to cover several stories a day. This can translate into over simplification, shoddy reporting, and inferior sources when matters of the brain are addressed.

Neuro-oncologist and Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives member [Robert B. Darnell](#), M.D., Ph.D., is troubled by the media's need to “dumb down” neuroscience concepts to “a seventh-grade reading level,” which too often translates to inaccuracies or misleading stories. Darnell, who is president and scientific director of the New York Genome Center, believes he and other scientists have an obligation to explain their work, but “science can be extremely complicated, and at times it's difficult and inappropriate to simplify the science beyond what is a reasonable representation,” he said. Darnell also feels that since we are now capable of detecting the probability of future diseases and disorders through gene sequencing in children, the media needs to better tell the cost/benefits and ethical side of the story. Enormous implications are at stake, he believes.

[John T. Walkup](#), M.D., a child psychologist from Cornell Medical College, complained that while great advances have been made in behavioral and pharmacological treatments, the lack of information in the media means that from three to ten years goes by before people seek treatment for disorders having to do with anxiety and bipolar disorder. “People don't like to believe that psychiatric disorders affect children,” he says, adding that it was partly the media's role to dispel this myth. There is also the problem of important stories not covered, said [Jessica Wright](#), Ph.D., research editor for [SFARI.org](#) and a former neuroscientist. Providing information about rare genetic disorders associated with autism is a primary mission of the [Simons Foundation](#) website, and she finds “people seeking to know about rare disorders are desperate.” Wright provided an example of a woman whose entire outlook was transformed by learning from a [story](#) posted on Simons website that she wasn't responsible for the death of her 2-year-old son, who had died suddenly from SUDEP (Sudden Unexplained Death in Epilepsy). “It's just one example of how putting information out there can be incredibly valuable,” said Wright.

Especially resonating during the Q&A was a discussion about the media coverage surrounding the Newtown, Connecticut shootings and the general portrayal of the shooter, Adam Lanza. Because he had been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism, many media accounts speculated that he must have lacked empathy. Linking empathy to autism and therefore, sociopathic tendencies was completely wrong, irresponsible, and hurtful, the panelists agreed, and a [prime example](#) of the way media speculation often skews public perception.

--Bill Glovin

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