

“An Injection of Truth?”

What has been the reaction in the lay media to Brian Deer’s BMJ exposure of the MMR scandal?

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Introduction

Recent articles by Brian Deer¹⁻³ in the BMJ have revealed insights into Andrew Wakefield’s conduct related to a now retracted article in the Lancet claiming a link between MMR and autism/bowel disorders.

The reporting of the Deer articles in the lay media has not been studied, thus leaving their potential impact upon professionals and the population unknown.

The articles, published in January 2011, call Wakefield’s research knowledge, skills and ethics into question and are the latest in a series of events in a wider MMR ‘saga’.

It has been suggested that stories in the news media may have an influence on patient decision making⁴, and in turn could in some way influence vaccination uptake.⁵

Parental Emotion

Characterised by a tone of personal ‘tragedy’, reports aimed to reach out to parents who are involved in making a decision regarding MMR. Detailed consequences of vaccine ‘dangers’ are described, but tragic tone in previous flashpoints is not evident in Deer article coverage.

*“How our happy child changed”,
“Little boy lost inside his own prison”*

Lack of Trust

Faith in the medical profession was reported to have been violated at early ‘flashpoints’. Health professionals were perceived to be a threat to children, aiming to administer “*MMR by stealth*”. By the time the 2011 Deer articles have been published, Wakefield has been discredited and trust has been restored. *“Doctor Shameless”*

Bad Science

Central to more recent events concerning MMR, this theme is consistent with an increase in favourable reports on MMR. Wakefield’s scientific knowledge is condemned, whilst his research skills are questioned. However this could be deemed to be less newsworthy in its lack of personalisation.

“Critics slated Wakefield’s methods and the DoH dismissed his work as “bad science” .”

Political Targeting

Prevalent was the tendency to use MMR to make a political point, rather than to discuss the health implications. Opponents used MMR as means to criticise the PM or the gov’t during the Leo Blair ‘crisis’. However, there was an inability to pin blame on a single gov’t figure in Deer articles, which detail a long and complex saga, becoming less newsworthy in its ambiguity.

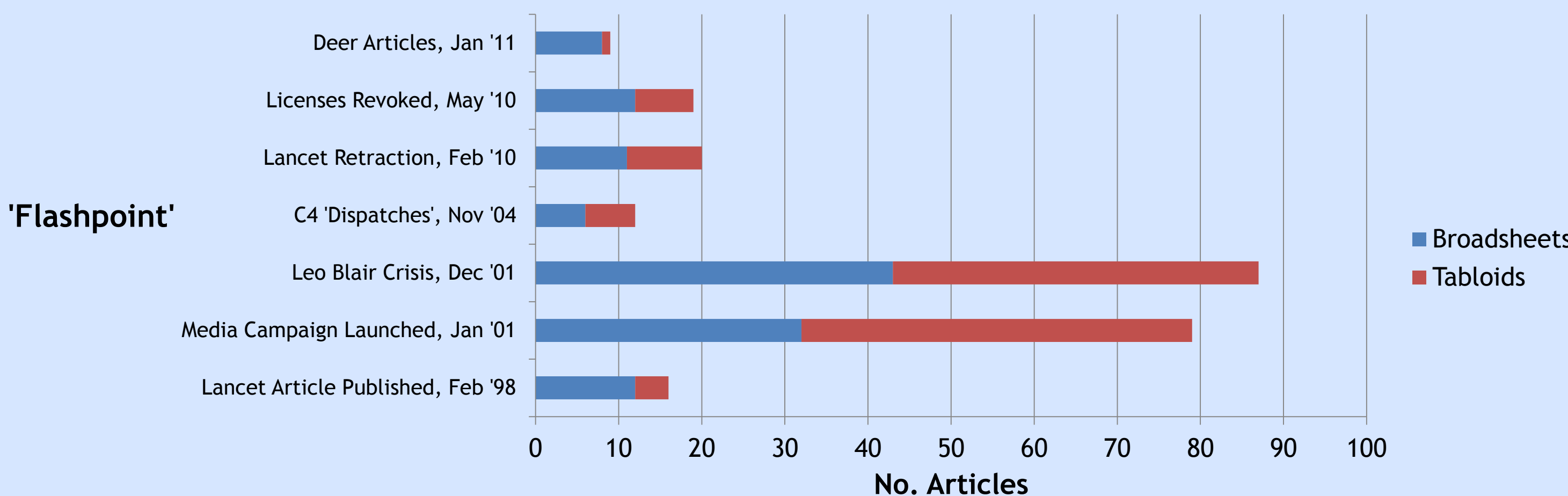
“My hero blair broke his promises to help my little boy-so now I’ll fight him as a tory mp”.

Results

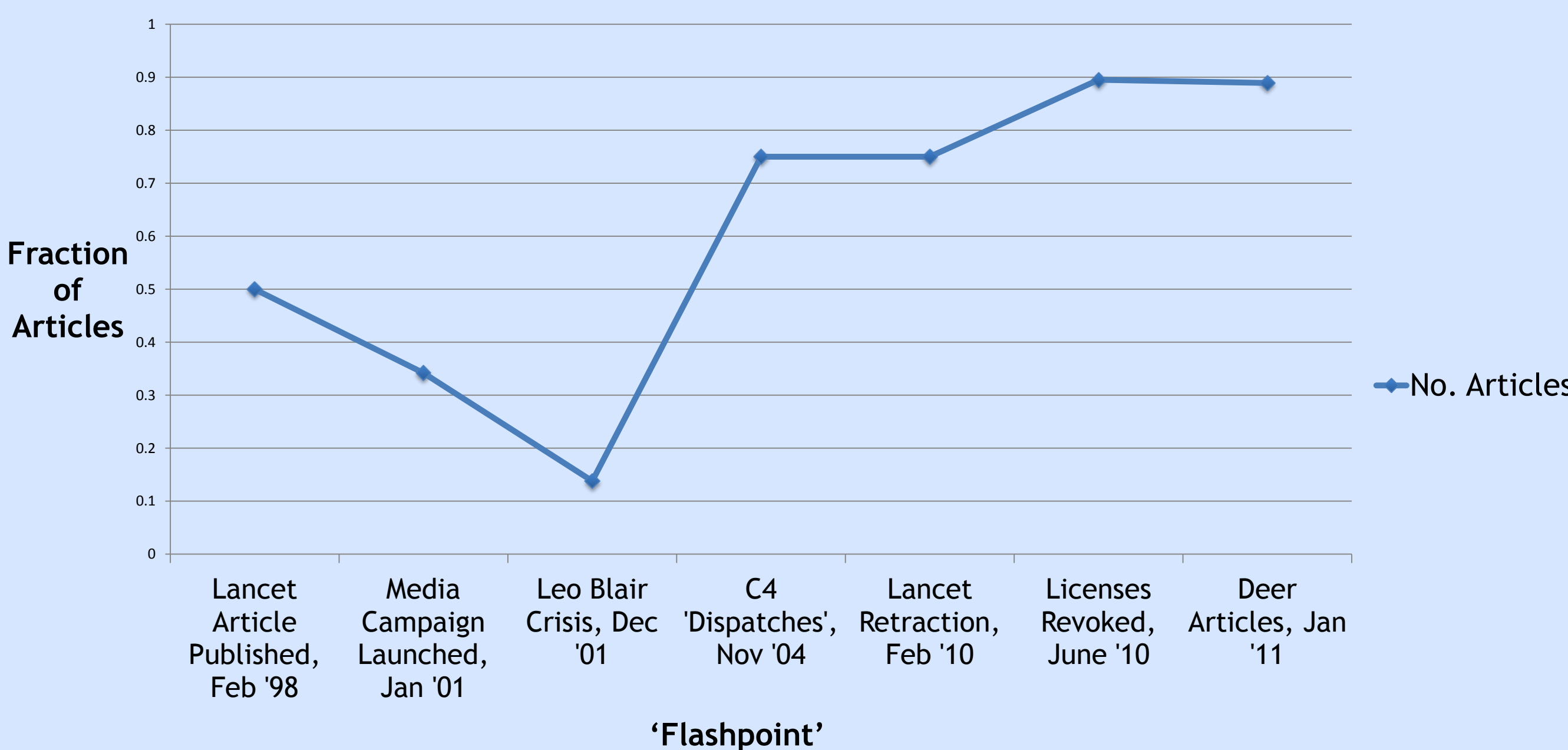
There was found to be a significantly muted response to the Deer BMJ articles in the lay media. This is consistent with a relatively recent downturn in coverage of the wider story, with a significant drop since events in 2001.

Four key themes were identified in reports: “**Lack of trust**”, “**Parental emotion**”, “**Political Targeting**” and “**Bad Science**”. After 2001, ‘Bad Science’ became the most prevalent theme, with coverage growing increasingly pro-MMR and anti-Wakefield.

Number of Newspaper Articles for each MMR ‘Flashpoint’



Fraction of Articles related to 'Bad Science'



Conclusions

This project suggests that over time, reporting on this MMR ‘saga’ has decreased, particularly since 2001, leading to a reduced level of response to Brian Deer’s 2011 articles in the BMJ.

An explanation for this could be found in the themes present in the news stories, which tended to become less emotive as time progressed, contributing to a less ‘newsworthy’ story.

References

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