



FIGURE 6. Number of deaths from each cause in one year for each story about this risk that appeared in BBC news.

Although this is a reporting bias, the media have no trouble justifying it on the grounds that people want to know about what's unusual and new, not what's old. There is no way they could report risk proportionately and still be in business. It would mean thousands of times more articles on smoking than on death from measles. But it is a bias, and although it is only speculation that this reporting bias affects people's estimation of the size of different risks, it seems like reasonable speculation. The extent of the bias has even been quantified (see Figure 6).⁵ Mad cow disease, measles, and AIDS received massive coverage in the United Kingdom relative to the number of people who died, whereas smoking, obesity, and alcohol received little. The precise numbers of deaths attributable to all of these is debatable, and the fashion for certain stories has changed since the research was carried out more than a decade ago, but the thrust of the argument seems fair.

So there are all kinds of reasons why risk depends on what we pay attention to. This is partly because our attention is scattered, but it's also because it's not clear which version of the numbers is the one to watch: the numbers about what happens, or the numbers about what doesn't.

ACCIDENTS

They were eleven, Norm and Kelvin, the time they went to swim in the reservoir. It was warm as they pedaled along the lanes, and when they arrived the water looked cool. They threw down their bikes by the reeds, took off their shoes, stripped to their briefs—Norm's blue, Kelvin's white—and stood on the grass bank not far past the two fishermen. The dare should have been a breeze, to be honest, but Norm hadn't figured on the wind-up.

"No, really, they do!" said Kelvin. "They're that long, with these evil teeth, and they creep up underneath and go [snapping his jaws together] gnah!"

"Yeah, but not your bollocks," said Norm.

Kelvin made rabbit, nibbling movements with his top teeth against his bottom lip, leaving brief pale slots in the pink skin.

"No way!" said Norm, looking away.

"Big. And pointed."

Kelvin paused. Norm felt the breeze.

"Chew your knob off."

"Shut up."

"Here, pikey-pikey, Norm knob!"

"Shut up!"

For a moment there was only the water beating at the reservoir wall and the wind in the reeds.

"What's up?" said Kelvin. "Cold?"