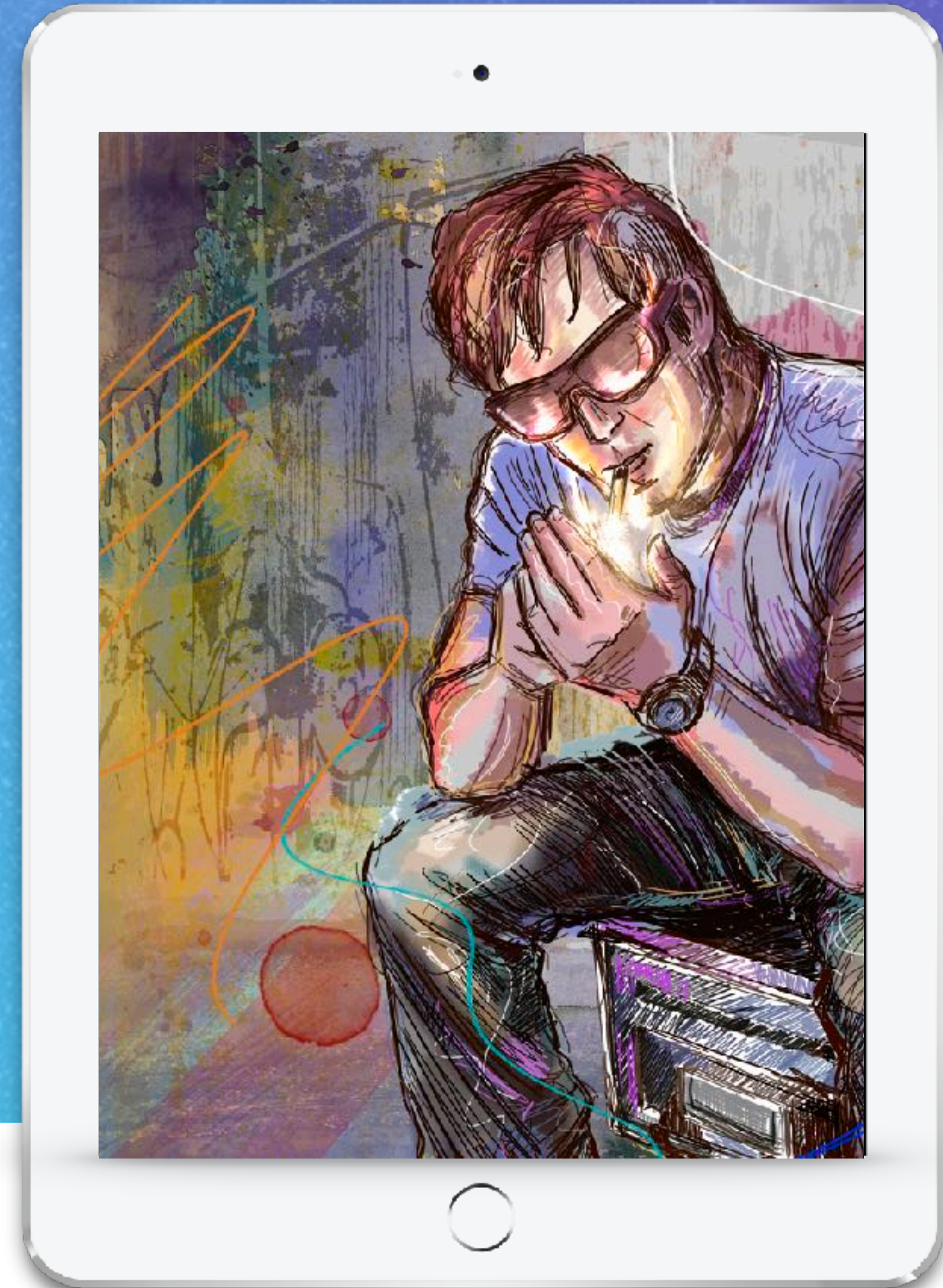


Factors Affecting Media Coverage of Tobacco Research News

Cheryl K. Olson, Sc.D.

71st Tobacco Science Research Conference
29 November 2017



Analysis of journalists' coverage of tobacco-related research

1

HOW DO JOURNALISTS DECIDE TO COVER A STORY?

2

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON SOURCES OF ERROR?

3

CAN WE IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF MEDIA COVERAGE?

EXAMPLE #1: COVERAGE OF LETTER TO NEJM

“Hidden Formaldehyde
in E-Cigarette Aerosols”



CBS This Morning

January 16, 2016

PLAY CBS NEWS VIDEO

CBS THIS MORNING

STUDY: HIDD

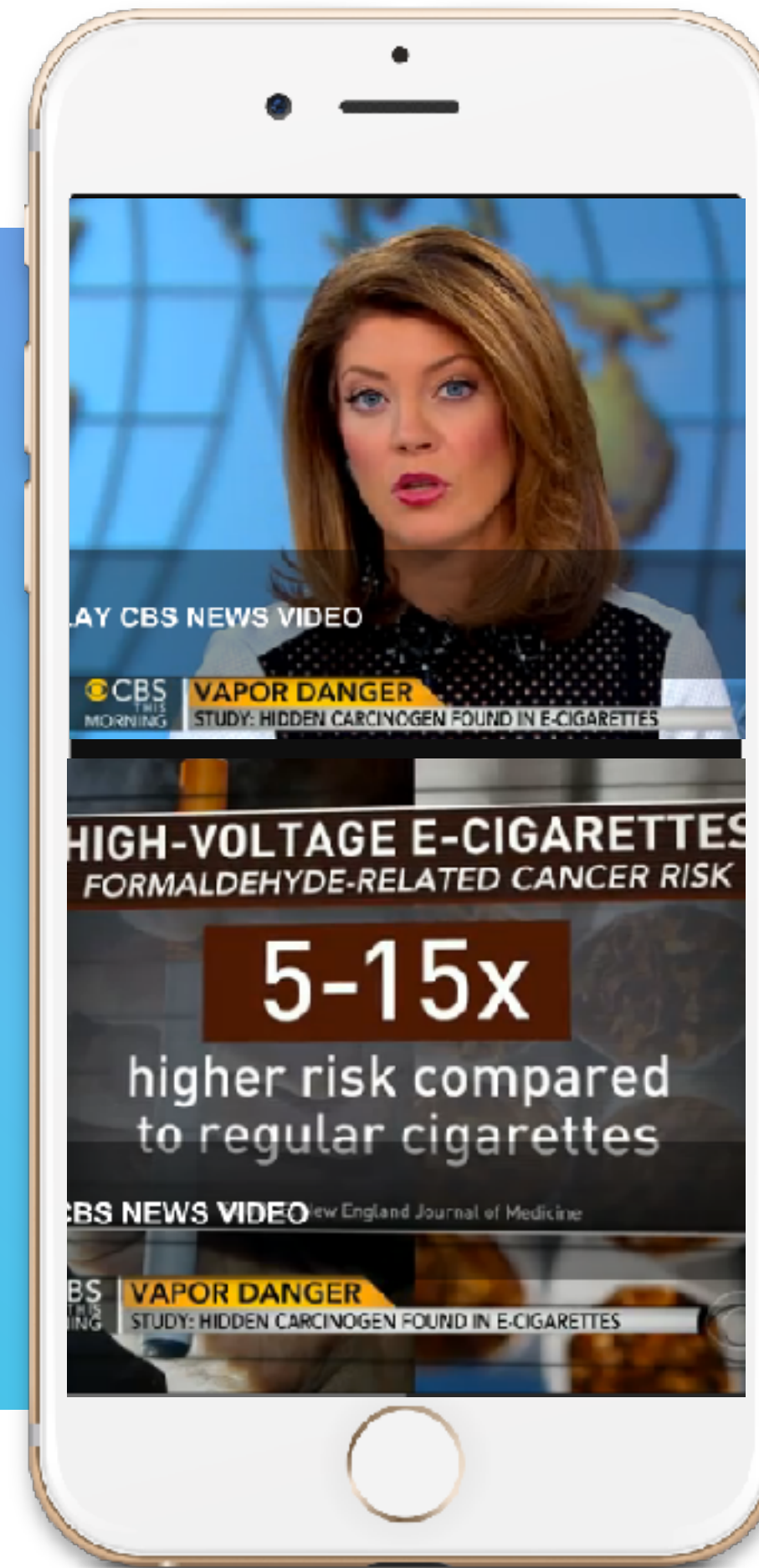
0:01 / 2:31

SHARE CC

The image shows a video player interface. The main video frame displays a news anchor, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a black and white polka-dot top. The background is a world map. A play button icon is visible on the left side of the video frame. Below the video frame, there is a dark grey control bar. On the left of the control bar, it shows the video progress as '0:01 / 2:31'. On the right, there are icons for 'SHARE', 'CC', and a volume icon. A small CBS eye logo is also visible on the right side of the video frame.

DECIDING TO COVER THIS STORY

- How it's found (news release)
- How to present it
- Angle: industry misleads public?
- Who gets interviewed



ALARMING HEADLINES

“E-cigarettes Can Produce More Formaldehyde Than Regular Cigarettes, Study Says”

—Los Angeles Times, 1/21/15

“Study Links E-Cigarettes to Formaldehyde, Cancer Risk; Research Found E- Cigarettes Produce New Type of Formaldehyde When Heating Nicotine-Laced Liquid”

—Wall Street Journal, 1/21/15

“E-Cigarettes Can Churn Out High Levels Of Formaldehyde”

—National Public Radio, 1/21/15

“Before You Vape: High levels of Formaldehyde Hidden in E-Cigs”

—NBC News, 1/21/15

COMMON ERRORS IN NEWS COVERAGE

- Alarmism
- Credulity
- Poor choice of interview subjects
- Accuracy vs. "balance"



COMMON ERRORS IN NEWS COVERAGE

- Non-specialist reporters
- Don't identify constraints of study
- Fail to grasp relative risks



KEY QUESTIONS JOURNALISTS SHOULD ASK:

- Validity
- Reliability
- Lab vs. Real World Situation
- Relative Risks vs. Absolute Risks



EXAMPLE #2: COVERAGE OF *PEDIATRICS* ARTICLE

“Flavored Electronic
Cigarette Use and
Smoking Among Youth”

**“Kids Who Use Flavored
E-Cigs More Likely to
Want to Try Cigarettes”**

—*Reuters*

**“Flavored E-Cigarettes
May Entice Teens
to Smoke”**

—*HealthDay News*

MORE QUESTIONS JOURNALISTS SHOULD ASK

- Correlation vs. Causation
- Statistical Significance vs. Real World Significance
- Use of False Equivalencies (e.g., total abstinence as a reference point for assessing risk)
- Unclear Definitions (e.g., "regular user")



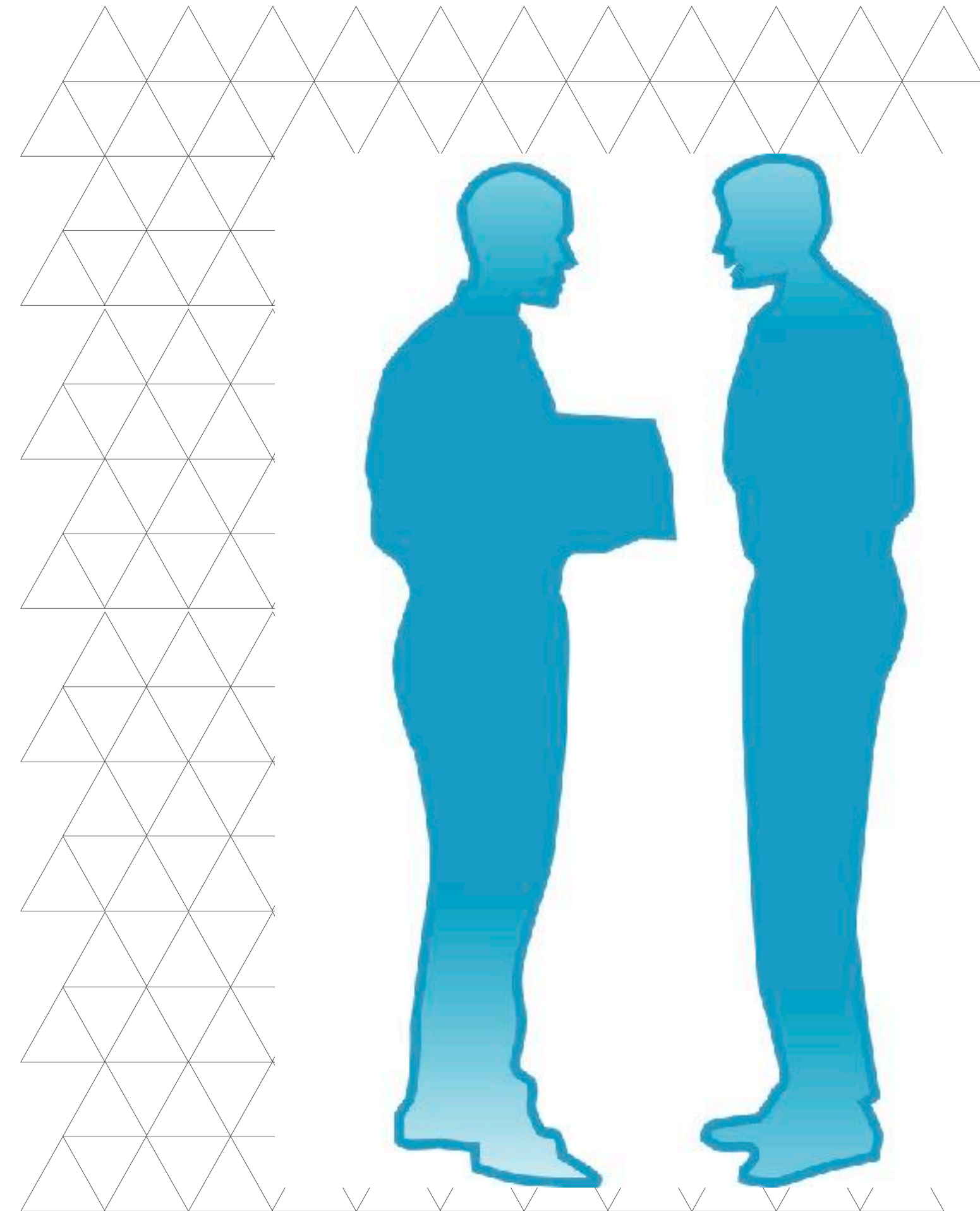
MORE CHALLENGES:

- Protecting children from new technologies



WHAT COULD BE DONE:

- Keep focus on improving accuracy of reporting
- Build relationships with key journalists



WHAT COULD BE DONE:

- Provide media training resources for researchers
- Refer press to credible non-industry researchers on harm reduction



WHAT COULD BE DONE:

- Online resources to help journalists cover science
- Online repository of resources on nicotine, reduced-harm products, tobacco cessation (including plain-language summaries)



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Thank you.

