A New Year's Resolution for Journalists

By Alex Berezow, PhD — December 30, 2016

2016 was a year to forget. A rough-and-tumble election, partisan rhetoric and “fake news,” and the loss of many beloved and talented people -- from Prince to Carrie Fisher -- made this calendar cycle a bit more difficult than most. Surely, 2017 must have something better in store.

To ensure that it does, we all must resolve to make it so. And as a science journalist, I can do my part by adopting these four resolutions. I hope other journalists join me.

(1) **We resolve to be as objective as humanly possible.** Total objectivity is impossible. Even if we do not have strong political leanings, all humans differ in their priorities and values. That alone prevents 100% objectivity. (For instance, I believe biomedical science is far more important than climate change, and my reportage reflects that.) Additionally, it is thought that even the very language we speak changes our perception of reality. Thus, René Descartes’ famous quote could be modified: “I think, therefore I am biased.”

(2) **Because all humans are inherently biased, we will be as transparent as possible in our analyses.** Transparency requires that we state our values up front. When I was head editor at RealClearScience, we took this dedication to transparency to an absolute extreme by publishing our political leanings, which earned us praise from many quarters. Here at ACSH, we unapologetically promote evidence-based science and medicine, regardless if it originates from academia or industry. Good science is good and junk science is junk, no matter who paid for it.

(3) **We must serve as fair and impartial watchdogs to hold powerful people accountable.** ACSH President Hank Campbell summarizes this resolution succinctly when he says, "Ask the awkward questions." From corporations to nonprofits, we must ask tough questions of those with whom we often agree and with whom we often disagree. We must give newly elected politicians
an honest chance to succeed (or, more likely, screw up) before we excoriate them. Anything short of this -- such as criticizing only one side of the political spectrum while ignoring the transgressions of the other side -- does irreparable damage to the credibility of journalism.

(4) **We will stop publishing "outrage du jour" stories.** The toxic combination of partisan journalism and social media results in a barrage of faux outrage every single day. This is good for internet traffic but bad for the health of our society. And pretending that President-Elect Trump (or the Republicans or the Democrats or Congress or the Supreme Court) each day nudges us closer to the Apocalypse further undermines the credibility of journalism, in addition to making it nearly impossible to report on legitimate scandals. (If everything is a scandal, then nothing is a scandal.) The result over the past decade has been predictable: The Left moves further Left, the Right moves further Right, and those in the center are left pondering the sanity of our compatriots.

Will journalists adopt these resolutions? The early signs are not good. Here is one example that is all too typical.

*Scientific American* posted an *hysterical article* [5] that predicted a "grim" future for science under the upcoming Trump administration. The author concluded, "We used to be the scientific leaders of the world." She apparently did not bother to research the simple fact that Republicans have historically funded science better than Democrats which, as Neil deGrasse Tyson correctly points out [6], is the real hallmark of being pro-science. Also, regardless of who is president, American science will remain #1 in the world [7] for the foreseeable future. The article also uncritically reprinted an outrageous claim that Trump will "devastate planet Earth". Tellingly, it quoted mostly from unserious left-wing outlets, such as EcoWatch, Slate, and Talking Points Memo.

In order to make 2017 a better year, we must tone down the partisan rhetoric. We must embrace pragmatism and reality while rejecting anti-scientific ideologies and the scourge of anti-intellectualism [8]. Finally, we must be civil and civically minded, constantly asking ourselves if our behavior is promoting or detracting from the common good.

That will require a concerted effort not just by journalists but by all citizens. We can do this, but we all have to pitch in.