

Slate: Contrarian with a Hint of Fake Science News



By Alex Berezow — January 4, 2017



Credit: Shutterstock [1]

Back when I was editor of RealClearScience, Slate's science page was a daily must-read. Now, I never read it because the quality of its reportage has fallen dramatically and because I grew tired of Phil Plait [deceiving readers about science policy](#) [2] and [posting selfies with his goat](#) [3].

There are plenty of other reasons to avoid Slate. Perhaps the best is that the site is enamored with publishing contrarian news articles. Their formula is time-tested: (1) Take a statement that is obviously stupid; (2) Write a headline vigorously defending it; and (3) Watch the traffic come rolling in. Whether the article is accurate, compelling, or well-conceived is of secondary importance.

Despite heightened sensitivity to "fake news," CNN made an ill-advised choice to illustrate a story about Russian hacking with an image from a video game. Slate [defended](#) [4] it. Cannibalism? Slate [thinks](#) [5] a case can be made for that too. Self-driving cars? Everybody is excited, except for Slate, who [worries](#) [6] that there won't be enough dead people to donate organs.

Like most of Slate's contrarian articles, the organ donation article is click-bait and has a hint of truthiness. But a more sober analysis reveals how utterly misguided it is. Consider the article's concluding sentence: "We don't want to reduce preventable fatalities on the road only to preventively [sic?] increase them for those waiting on the transplant list."

Really? That sentence betrays an utter lack of common sense. Additionally, it reveals that the authors are unaware that organ transplant recipients often do not live long lives.

For instance, according to the *Journal of Thoracic Disease* [7], about 15% of heart transplant recipients die within one year, and more than 25% die within five years. Within 20 years, about 80% of heart transplant recipients will be dead. Similarly, about 25% of liver transplant recipients die within five years (PDF [8]).

To illustrate why this matters from a public health standpoint, let's pretend that Person A is a healthy 35-year-old and Person B is a sickly 35-year-old in need of a heart transplant. From this moment forward, let's consider two scenarios.

Scenario 1. Person A lives to age 80. However, while waiting on the organ transplant list, Person B drops dead at age 38. Combined, from age 35 onward, they lived an additional 48 life-years.

Scenario 2. Person A is killed in a car accident at age 35. His heart is a perfect match for Person B. Required to take immunosuppressive drugs, Person B lives a somewhat normal life and then dies at age 60. Combined, they lived an additional 25 life-years.

More life-years are better than fewer life-years. Thus, Scenario 1 is vastly preferable to Scenario 2.

That very simple analysis -- which neither the authors nor a Slate editor bothered to do -- overturns the article's entire conclusion. True, people waiting for organs may be in trouble from self-driving cars, but the overall increase in life-years means this technology will have an enormously net positive effect on society.

That's not a sexy, contrarian conclusion fit for publication in Slate. It is, however, correct.

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[2] http://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2015/05/slates_science_page_has_gone_crazy.html

[3]

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[7] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4387387/#__sec2title

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