The Schism Between Science And Science Journalism

By Hank Campbell — March 8, 2017

The American Council on Science and Health and RealClearScience got a national dialog going about the credibility of corporate science journalism when we published our infographic ranking media companies and non-profits [1] on how well they covered the science, and how interesting they were.

It's not easy to do both. I enjoy Physics World and MIT Technology Review, for example, but when people who curate science articles for a living say they are not "compelling" I know what they mean. They mean much of the public will not find them as accessible as USA Today or publications written for a larger audience. That means the science messages will get lost.

But is a panel of science editors wrong for putting that in a chart? It seems they are, at least if people who get a paycheck from corporations with poor showing don't like how they are identified. Obviously these panels will be subjective but immediately the knives were out for the group. The New York Times and Mother Jones, who have never found anything wrong with hand-picked IARC committees chosen specifically to declare that pesticides cause cancer, for example, questioned the integrity of the panel itself.

Well, the panel consisted of three very experienced editors, two with Ph.D.s in science, and all with years under their belts curating science articles for millions of people per month. That is as expert as it gets yet they were considered suspect and dismissed as just "opinions." Writers for the New York Times especially rallied around their paychecks in a breathtaking display of voluntary corporate altruism.
Reject it if you want, and embrace yourself and your friends in the logical fallacy of the cloak of Pulitzers past, but in the very next Science Tuesday print edition of the *New York Times* we were treated to an endorsement of acupuncture \[2\] (digital version last week.) This was a tiny study, it invoked useless fMRI, and it was about alternative medicine. There is nothing essential about it for a science audience, much less deserving of being in the print edition of a top five newspaper.

It was a trifecta of woo, and yet partisan political journalists at anti-science sites still defended its inclusion because, well, Harvard.
This kind of appeal to authority logical fallacy is everything that is wrong in science journalism. We shouldn't question the validity of a study on acupuncture because the writers are from Harvard? Would *Mother Jones* accept a peer-reviewed study on atrazine that was done by Syngenta? Of course they wouldn't, they would actually dismiss it out-of-hand, even if every other scientist in America agreed with the findings, because Syngenta is not their political ally. *Mother Jones* writers are instead paid to undermine science and corporations and there is a similar anti-corporate mentality in academia. Yet when it comes to alternative medicine, which *Mother Jones* gets millions of dollars to advertise, their writers insist we have to give it a fair chance. Teach the controversy! At least about the alternative medicine that *Mother Jones* readers and their corporate funders love.

To him, criticizing acupuncture, which has never been superior to a placebo in a double-blind clinical trial (that would instead make it medicine rather than an "alternative") is "trolling" but *Mother Jones* routinely dismissing the entire pro-science world as "industry front groups" is in the minds of *Mother Jones* writers (invariably, it is their go-to claim when they have no real argument) completely legitimate.

Why should the public trust their claims when they are clearly filtering the science they accept through the political beliefs of their readers and advertisers?

What hope does the public have for knowing who to trust?

At *Nature*, they discuss the hand-wringing of the *New York Times, Mother Jones* and others [3] (outside academia, scientists nodded their heads in agreement) and put it in the context of a larger problem in science sensationalism (*Nature* 543, 150 09 March 2017 doi:10.1038/543150a - digital available now). *Nature* knows the real issue is that kind of sensationalism and a desire to get in
corporate media, because Nature editors experience it every day. Just about every study will try to be in *Nature* first, and the claims they read will often be as provocative and scientifically sexy as possible. Being in a high impact journal means legitimacy. **Activist groups will even groom high-profile scholars as senior authors to boost their chances** [4] of getting accepted.

*Nature* knows the difference, more often than not, because they have experts determining study validity, not journalists. Science is not going to come down in favor of acupuncture just because one political demographic in the audience overwhelmingly believes in it.

Compare that to corporate media, who love weak observational claims, the bolder and more ridiculous the better. It gets them attention, and that attention makes scientists want to appeal to corporate media like the *New York Times* writers because an appearance in the science section lends a veneer of credibility the same way appearing in *Nature* does. While *Mother Jones* writers will bow obsequiously to the name Harvard, Harvard is now bragging their acupuncture claim has been validated by the *New York Times*. Next, lots of woo sites selling acupuncture and other alternative facts about health will use that appearance in NYT to claim legitimacy.

Where are the *New York Times* science writers when it comes to objecting to this misuse of their science section? Nowhere to be found, it's a fellow insider and not to be criticized.

Science itself covers the entire cultural spectra. Science is about **progress**, it requires libertarian freedom to pursue, and the conclusions must be inherently conservative because peer reviewers are supposed to be. So whenever you can, get context from scientists and doctors rather than corporate journalists. Instead of trying to make corporate media more scientific, please help make independent science media like us as popular as corporate journalism.