I've never been much for the word "tribe." It sounds too insular in 2018, the kind of term (see also "zeitgeist", "heteronormative", and "schadenfreude") thrown around by barely literate postmodernists with their heads in the clouds believing what they tell each other as the real world passes by.

That's not to say it isn't an accurate description of science media.

We certainly have tribes: There are progressive ideologues in large media corporations denying reality as they frame science belief (and denial) through their politics; there are academics who believe the public simply have a deficit of information and showing them some Powerpoint slides will fix it; we have zealots who believe every skeptical question must be met with fire and brimstone.

Heck, we have so many distinct tribes there will even be people who object that I wrote the word "we" - they will say science communication is their fiefdom, their domain, and anyone different from them is not really a science communicator.
My feeling when our confederation of anarchists in science media once again turn on each other while environmental activists play nicely and cackle like Scrooge McDuck atop a pile of money.

Science media is fractured but other tribes, like environmental activists, have clearly been successful and have put aside their differences and flourished by working together. What separates them from us?

One big cultural difference is they don’t let a few elites declare that success is a zero-sum game - if you win, they must lose. Starbucks made coffee an experience rather than a cheap drink with breakfast, but it did not put diners out of business. Starbucks instead caused all boats in that market to rise. Don’t let anyone in science communication tell you that you can’t be part of the tribe unless you are below them in the pecking order, or you must desire to work in corporate media. It’s the kind of fake appeal-to-popularity narrative we oppose when activists do it to science. If you are new to science communication, we don’t want to put you in your place, we want to publish you. Or you can write at Science 2.0 [2] or ScienceBlogs [3] or even start your own using Wordpress.

Science communication is like a game of D&D. Sometimes you find treasure, mostly you fight trolls.

If you don’t know what Dungeons and Dragons is, I am not saying you won’t be a successful science communicator, but you may lack some cultural instincts to do work that resonates with the public. No one cares about jargon, or drilling down into some arcane aspect of a field, except five of your friends. Metaphors enlighten, cultural references help. I used D&D because it has trolls, and so does the world of science. See how that works?

Anyway, if you don’t know, D&D is a role-playing game invented in the 1970s - you pretend to be a character with other friends who are also characters in some mysterious or dangerous situation. Because it was based on long-standing fantasy archetypes, sword and sorcery like the worlds of R.E. Howard and Tolkein, the typical D&D group, the tribe, became a swordsman, a ranged weapon jack-of-all-trades, a magician scholar, and a clever thief or a mystic. (1) You can probably guess right away how those different types working together in science communication can be a great thing. If we can get people to do it.

Science communication has similar archetypes: Fighters, Diplomats, Explorers, and Educators.
A Fighter is just what it sounds like. It would be great if we lived in a world where everyone was nice, no one lied, and we could all talk and then hug it out. But that’s not reality. Some people have said the American Council on Science and Health (or me personally) would be more successful if we were just nicer. It's been tried for decades, by us and many others, and it failed. When has unilateral disarmament ever worked? Anti-science activists have fighters and if we are all pacifists we'll quickly be overrun. Anyone who has had environmental groups terrorize their workplace or their home or been vilified in media because they stood up for science probably wishes they had someone to be the tip of the spear, or at least hold a shield, on their side. Someone like Dr. Alex Berezow [7] or Dr. David Zaruk [8] or David Gorski, MD [9], are a few examples of fighters in science communication. However, you’ve likely heard phrases such as 'if your only tool is a hammer, every problem is a nail' and that is why we can't have all fighters. If everyone is on the attack people will just be afraid.

An Explorer is like a missionary or a pioneer. They are going to leave our tribe and venture into uncharted wilderness. They do not attack the army of activism, they go around them and try to reach their supporters, who are likely well-meaning, genuine believers. If I see someone on the street canvassing for Greenpeace, I would never be hostile toward them even though I am a fighter. But if I see Ken Cook, who runs Environmental Working Group, or Andrew Kimbrell of Center for Food Safety, I am going after them, because I know they are frauds motivated solely by money.

An explorer won’t bother with those guys at all, and will instead want to understand the motivations and values of their tribe members who distrust science. They have to have a lot of patience and a
thick skin, because explorers are most likely to get arrows in the back. Examples of explorers are Prof. Kevin Folta [10], Vinay Prasad, M.D [11], and Dr. Jamie Wells [12]. Since pioneers sometimes discover new lands or paths, they are needed, but they are not going to be equipped to fight off an army. They work best from a distance.

An Intellectual creates the informational tools that help fighters, explorers, and diplomats but they do not feel suited to those jobs. This will be most scientists, obviously, though will not be most science communicators. They are prized for being important sources of information, even if they don’t relish the spotlight. Examples are Dr. Tommaso Dorigo [13], Jesse Ausubel [14], and Dr. Michael Dourson [15]. Intellectuals need protection. Activists count on creating an "icy chill" effect on scholarly work by using Freedom of Information Act requests and emails to university administrators as weapons. If the public has already been reached by pioneers, or fighters can add protection, or diplomats can help with leaders, the work of intellectuals goes smoother.

A Diplomat looks for common ground. They want to build bridges between tribes. As such, they may want to cede points you don’t like to concede and may want to fight just the really important battles, not every skirmish. One example: In the smoking cessation and harm reduction camps, for example, there are some who insist e-cigarettes (vaping et al.) are not tobacco products. We were diplomatic and testified at FDA that until there was an affordable optically pure nicotine that didn’t come from a tobacco plant, it should be regulated as a tobacco product. FDA appreciated that, and were then more inclined to listen to us when we said the “grandfather” date for vaping devices under the "Deeming Regulations [16]" should not be 2015, because it would create millions of casual criminals and help few people. They eventually changed the date for applications to 2022. A diplomat will recognize that conflict is sometimes a necessary part of diplomacy but will want to try to talk things out first. Examples are Dr. Brandon McFadden [17], Dr. Steve Savage [18], or Dr. Tara Smith [19].

As you gathered, any of these alone is going to make for a terribly short engagement against a balanced army. Fighters are going to be contained by the popular opinion outrage crafted by diplomats and intellectuals on the other side. Explorers are going to be harmed in close combat, intellectuals won’t leave the library if they are at risk, and other groups will never talk if they can just overrun diplomats. Our tribe needs to be like a D&D game if we want to beat back the hordes at the gate.

Which means just because someone has a different style than you, or different politics, or a different audience, doesn't make them wrong. If we can reach four readers with a diverse, balanced effort, two on each side, rather than two who already agree with us, let's get the four. And let's stop doing the job of activists for them by tearing each other down because we didn't like some retweet.

Which are you in our D&D science tribe?

There is really no right or wrong answer here, the only time there is a wrong one is if you are one thing and someone else declares you must be like them or you are not part of the tribe.
But if you are a science communicator, I am curious to see who you envision yourself as in a comment.

Note:

(1) In "Lord of the Rings", for example, you had a ranger, an archer, a magician, and a thief as the core characters. Arguably the strongest framework for what became D&D was Poul Anderson's "Three Hearts, Three Lions", where a soldier is transported to an alternate world and his allies are a swan maiden and a dwarf and they battle a dragon, a giant, a werewolf, and a troll.