Imagine going into the office or wherever your place of employment happens to be. As you pour yourself a cup of coffee, eager to get to work on an exciting project, somebody you don't know drives by your window, calls you a fraud, then speeds off onto the highway. Befuddled, you sit down and check your e-mail, only to find that you have received a death threat.

That's what it's like to be a science writer in 2017. While the drive-by slanders are a near-daily occurrence, thankfully the death threats are rarer. But they do happen. For reasons I will never understand, character assassination and verbal abuse are simply considered routine hazards of the job, not only for writers but scientists, as well. Just ask Dr. Kevin Folta, a pro-GMO scientist, who has been harassed viciously not only by anonymous people on the internet, but by supposed intellectuals like Nassim Taleb.

Those of us who stick around grit our teeth and repeat, "Illegitimi non carborundum," because both science and common sense are on our side. Sometimes, however, it's worth going on offense by reflecting upon the intellectual bankruptcy of our critics.

By far, the most common smear leveled against anyone who is pro-science, as in pro-GMO, pro-vaccine, pro-chemistry, pro-biotechnology, or pro-agriculture is that we are "industry shills." The criticism is particularly ludicrous when it is aimed at ACSH, since about 74% of our funding [2] comes from individuals and 22% from foundations. Our corporate funding is a tiny fraction of what Mother Jones or Environmental Defense Fund or American Heart Association or many other non-profits receives. Obviously if we were trying to be industry shills, we are really bad at it [3].

What we aren't bad at is educating the public about science and health, and that confounds
corporate shill conspiracy theorists. Consider an article we published recently: "Most New Cancer Drugs Lack Evidence of Improved Survival or Quality of Life." Why would we publish an article that is so critical of the pharmaceutical industry if we were secretly shills for Big Pharma? If corporate overlords were directing our every move, would they allow an article like that to be published? Of course not.

Yet, such logic is lost upon our critics, some of whom would definitely know better, if their ideology didn't get in the way of their claims about being skeptics.

Is There a Difference Between Conspiracy Theorists and Those Who Mimic Them?

David Gorski, a medical doctor and blogger who goes by the nom de plume "Orac," has long waged a war on pseudoscience. Because of it, according to him on his bio page, he has been targeted viciously by anti-vaccine activists, who labeled him an industry shill, and by neo-Nazis, who called him a pedophile. Others have accused him of collaborating with frauds. Dr. Gorski even warns his patients about an 18-year-long "campaign of vilification" against him.

One would think that experiencing such outrageous libel and injustice would make Dr. Gorski more skeptical of claims on the Internet and think twice before treating others the same way. Yet, one would be wrong. On the contrary, Dr. Gorski gleefully dishes it out. For instance, on Twitter, he wrote:

In reply to ACSH

David Gorski @gorskon · 18h

Funny how, to @ACSHorg,

“good science” always seems to align with industry, particularly pharma, food, and chemical. @mbalter

Let's set aside the fact that, as we showed above, his statement is patently false. We have always believed that good science is good, regardless of who pays for it. About 2/3 of R&D in America is paid for by industry. If industry vanished overnight, it would take the vast majority of scientists and scientific research with it. That's why research must be judged on its merits rather than by the funding source. Only those who are incapable of doing so fall back on the "corporate shill!"

ad hominem.

Once a person convinces himself that those he disagrees with are actually corporate shills, it isn't much of a leap into full-blown conspiracy theories. That's essentially what happened to Joseph McCarthy. Instead of corporate shills, he saw Soviet spies and communists everywhere he looked. Similarly, disgraced journalist Michael Balter, who was fired from Science, is convinced that a conspiracy exists to suppress science. Naturally, ACSH -- as well as anyone who believes that industry produces good science -- is at the center of the conspiracy.
Perhaps the most amusing criticism is made by Dr. Mark Hoofnagle, who also believes that ACSH is at the center of a conspiracy. His chain of logic is certainly unique. He once wrote:

They seem to have lots of legitimate scientific content, a staff with legitimate credentials, and a list of distinguished policy advisors, as well as good articles on anti-vax, ag, alti-med [sic] etc. The American Council on Science and Health, is not just astroturf, but may be one of the best astroturf investments out there for those interested in advancing their industry message. Why is this? Because they are really good at using legitimate science reporting and advocacy to camouflage a freemarket [sic] fundamentalist product.

In other words, Dr. Hoofnagle believes that ACSH is a pro-industry shill with a sneaky free market agenda. (Unless you are a communist, what exactly is wrong with the free market?) His evidence for this conspiracy is that our team of highly credentialed scientists and medical doctors is very effective at communicating legitimate science. Ergo, something nefarious is going on.

Not only is that unhinged, but it's precisely the same some of argument used by UFO conspiracy theorists and 9/11 Truthers. It's unfortunate that some medical doctors and self-described journalists choose to mimic them.
Links
[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox#/media/File:LargeTribarGotschuchenAustria.JPG
[3] https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/07/27/if-acsh-is-a-corporate-shill-were-really-bad-at-it