

Will Journalism Destroy Science?



By Alex Berezow — February 8, 2018



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

The war on science has at least three fronts.

First, there is the widely reported political war on science, widely and erroneously believed to be waged exclusively by conservatives, when in reality, progressives are just as eager to throw science under the bus when it suits their agenda. (ACSH President Hank Campbell and I wrote an entire book about this topic, called [Science Left Behind](#) [2].) As a general rule, when science and political activists clash, the activists usually win.

Second, there is the legal war on science, in which unscrupulous lawyers use scientific uncertainty against science to score jackpot verdicts and settlements. All a lawyer has to do is accuse a product of causing cancer, and many companies are willing to fork over cash just to make the lawyer go away, even if the product doesn't cause cancer. Precisely [this sort of shakedown is going on right now in California](#) [3], which is why the answer to the question, "[Will Lawyers Destroy Science?](#)" [4] is an emphatic, "Yes, they absolutely could."

Third, there is the journalistic war on science. Of the three, this one may be the most insidious, since the war is conducted in high-profile media outlets by practitioners who don't understand science or hide behind a false pretense of "transparency" and "balance." Indeed, the journalistic war on science is complex because there are two different wars: an accidental war and an insidious war.

Journalists' Accidental War on Science

The "accidental war" is carried out by usually well-meaning but utterly clueless science and health journalists who think they are helping communicate science but are actually undermining it. There is perhaps no better example than what happened recently: Media outlets all over the world

reported that asparagus is linked to cancer. It is not. Amazingly, [the research upon which these journalists based their false report didn't even mention asparagus](#) [5]. No matter. The story, aided by click-bait headlines, spread around the globe in a matter of hours, attracting millions of readers.

This has happened so many times that people have become jaded by health news. They don't know what to trust. One day vegetables cure cancer; the next, they cause cancer. The public then blames journalists for being idiots and scientists for not knowing what they're doing, which is why bad science journalism is really bad for both science and journalism.

One of the primary culprits in the accidental war on science are university press offices. Like journalists, people who write press releases are well-meaning, but they have only one goal in mind: To get press coverage for the university. As a result, press releases are often uncritical and hyped, flowering up mediocre research as something groundbreaking and Nobel-worthy. Time pressured journalists eat this stuff up, often literally copying-and-pasting from press releases without ever reading the original research.

For some reason, the National Association of Science Writers hands out [science writing awards for press releases](#) [6], which would be sort of like giving an automobile communications award to a used car salesman.

Journalists' Insidious War on Science

The "insidious war" on science is conducted by bad actors. Some journalists, such as [Michael Pollan](#) [7] and [Mark Bittman](#) [8], have books to sell, and they are allowed to make themselves rich by peddling pseudoscience in high-profile media outlets. Worse, some journalists -- like the anti-GMOers [Carey Gillam](#) [9] and [Paul Thacker](#) [10] -- are simply activists in journalists' clothing. Their intention is to smear and defame scientists who engage in research, such as on genetically engineered crops, that they personally dislike.

When confronted, these "journalists" (if we can even call them that) always respond the same way: They call their critics corporate shills. They falsely claim that they are providing "balance" to a debate that is dominated by industry propaganda. They claim the mantle of "transparency" while neglecting to mention any conflicts-of-interest they or their sources might possess. Legitimate scientific challenges are dismissed, and the go-to response is an *ad hominem* assault. All of their critics are dupes, dishonest, or secretly on the payroll of Big Business.

As ridiculous as this strategy is, it actually works. Character assassination is extremely effective. (This is one big reason why scientists are hesitant to join public debates.) Because there is essentially no legal recourse against people who commit slander or libel, those without morals will continue to deploy this strategy. It has been used against my colleagues and me countless times.

How to Fight Back

In today's hyperpartisan climate, it is tough to see a feasible path out of this cultural quagmire. Perhaps if we all acknowledge this one fact, we can begin to make progress: People you like aren't always right, and people you dislike aren't always wrong. Only facts matter, and the truth is still the truth even if you hate the messenger.

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/02/08/will-journalism-destroy-science-12550>

Links

[1] <https://www.storyblocks.com/stock-image/newspapers-from-around-the-world-htcgvsnumdwj6gv5xi6>

[2] <https://www.amazon.com/Science-Left-Behind-Feel-Good-Anti-Scientific/dp/161039321X>

[3] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/01/29/california-coffee-causes-cancer-and-lawyers-collect-fee-12494>

[4] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/12/29/will-lawyers-destroy-science-12340>

[5] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/02/08/no-asparagus-wont-give-you-cancer-12546>

[6] <https://www.nasw.org/excellence>

[7] <https://www.deniersforhire.com/bad-journalists/michael-pollan/>

[8] <https://www.deniersforhire.com/bad-journalists/mark-bittman/>

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