

When an English Major Becomes a Health Editor



By Alex Berezow — July 28, 2018



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

One of the biggest problems with journalism -- particularly science journalism -- is the fact that many people who practice it aren't qualified to do so. Believe it or not, being a good journalist involves more than knowing how to turn on a computer and pound away aimlessly on a keyboard.

Unfortunately, that seems to be the only requirement for some journalists. A few years ago, I was told by an editor at *The Economist* that they do not hire journalism majors. Instead, they hire people who studied "something real" and then are taught how to do journalism after they are hired. It's a good rule, and media outlets everywhere would be better off if they all adopted the practice.

***The Guardian* Blows It... Again**

Recently, the British newspaper *The Guardian* published an [article](#) [2] scaremongering about JUUL, a company that sells e-cigarettes that are marketed as a safer alternative to regular cigarettes. What's the problem? Apparently, some teenagers think they're cool. Therefore, JUUL is evil.

The article, written by *The Guardian's* health editor Sarah Boseley -- whose [English degree](#) [3] has given her a commanding grasp of biomedical science -- declared Juul's device to be "ultra-discreet" and might "lead [non-smokers] to start smoking cigarettes." The headline blares that the UK has been told to stop e-cigarettes from taking off among kids.

Told by whom? Anti-vaping activists. The "ultra-discreet" device actually looks like a USB drive that somebody sticks in their mouth. (Yeah, that's totally discreet... because people usually suck on the end of USB drives.) And the "gateway drug" argument Ms. Boseley makes is [just as bogus for e-cigarettes as it is for marijuana](#) [4].

True, teenagers and non-smokers shouldn't begin vaping for the fun of it. Both JUUL and the FDA

acknowledge that the devices should not be marketed to underaged people. And let's be honest: Of all the different things that teenagers could try -- from hard drugs to unprotected sex -- nicotine is rather harmless by comparison. It's not all that different from caffeine. If I had a teenager and the most rebellious act he or she did was vaping, I'd be a happy parent. Context and perspective matter.

So, what's the story here? There is no story. Ms. Boseley just gave free advertising to a bunch of activists who are religiously opposed to nicotine. In any sane world, a company that invented a device that is 95% safer than cigarettes (a figure that comes from the [UK's NHS](#) [5]) would be hailed as a godsend.

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It's troubling enough that a person who knows nothing about public health is allowed to write about it. It's far more troubling that a person who knows nothing about public health is in charge of the topic at a major international publication. So, I decided to take a look at some of the other articles this English major has published. What I found was predictable.

For instance, this: [How disgraced anti-vaxxer Andrew Wakefield was embraced by Trump's America](#) [6]. The truth is that the anti-vaxxer movement began with members of the progressive left, such as Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and Bill Maher. The demographics of the anti-vaccine movement have changed over time, but this rather inconvenient historical fact is missing from Ms. Boseley's article.

In another article, Ms. Boseley claims that [the government can fix obesity](#) [7], but the plan could be foiled by evil corporations. Just how evil are those corporations? Evil enough to [hijack your brain](#) [8] with Cheetos, according to her. And she appears supportive of a rather twisted idea to put [pictures of rotting teeth](#) [9] on sugary foods to deter people from eating them.

In other words, *The Guardian* has hired an English major-turned-political activist who is completely ignorant of basic science to run its health page. And the result is exactly what you'd expect: It's scientifically illiterate and politically bonkers.

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[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jul/27/stop-juul-e-cigarette-from-taking-off-among-kids-uk-told>

[3] http://www.thevineagency.com/author_sarahboseley.html

[4] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/06/20/dear-cdc-if-marijuana-isnt-gateway-drug-neither-are-e-cigarettes-11459>

[5]

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/454517/Ecigarettes_

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jul/18/how-disgraced-anti-vaxxer-andrew-wakefield-was-embraced-by-trumps-america>

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