

The Not-So-Charmed Life of a Junk Science Debunker



By Alex Berezow, PhD — August 22, 2019



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

Every once in a while, I like to take stock of what I'm doing in life.

As I was in the process of earning my PhD in microbiology, I learned some things about myself. (I think grad school teaches you just as much about yourself as it does the subject you're studying.) I didn't like years-long projects with no guarantee of success. When experiments failed, I took it personally and became depressed. I learned that I needed "quick hits" -- tiny, daily successes -- to make me happy and motivated. Since I was good at writing, a career in science journalism seemed to make sense.

In one form or another¹, I've been doing just that for the past nine years. To make a long story short, that's how I ended up at ACSH as a "junk debunker." On most days, it's the best job in the world. But not all days.

When I first entered the profession, I thought having a PhD would confer me with credibility. As I accumulated publications in high-profile outlets -- such as BBC News, *The Economist*, *The Atlantic*, and *Wall Street Journal* -- I thought that would afford me additional respect and authority.

Boy, was I wrong. Here are some actual things that have been written to me over the years, usually via email or social media. (I am censoring some of the worst comments. Use your imagination as needed.)

*"Your face looks like a dirty t***. Go f*** yourself."*

"Why does Alex Berezow talk weird? Is that because the MMR vaccine lobotomized his brain?"

*"Alex Berezow is licking the a*** of the NWO."*

"Shut your lying Jew mouth, bastard."²

*"F*** off and die."*

"Corporate whore."

"One of the worst and most ignorant corporate hacks ACSH has ever rescued from obscurity."

"This excuse for a man is a very sad and sick individual indeed."

"You do the devil's work Alex... Don't think you'll get away with your crimes."

"Ideological crank."

That last insult is particularly interesting because the far left and far right cannot agree on what sort of crank I am:

"He has made a career red baiting fellow scientists as a collaborator with the conservative movement."

"He is a smug socialist and totalitarian."

Our critics routinely distort or flat-out lie about our scientific positions, professional collaborations, and sources of funding. We have been defamed viciously with the clear intent of destroying our reputations and careers. Some of us have received threats of physical violence or worse.

You never really get used to this. The best you can do is build up a hard shell and ignore it. But the abuse is always there in the back of your mind.

It's difficult to communicate to non-writers what it's like to endure this on a near-daily basis. The best analogy I can make is this: Imagine driving to work, and as you park your car and walk toward the office, some random stranger drives by, rolls down his window, and shouts, "F*** you, liar!" Every. Single. Day.

Does Fact-Checking and Truth-Telling Make a Difference?

I just discovered an amazing [quote](#) ^[2] by author Stephen King:

"If you intend to write as truthfully as you can, your days as a member of polite society are numbered."

How true. That sums up quite perfectly the life of a junk science debunker. I find that we are politically homeless, reviled by left and right with equal fervor.

And yet, despite the persistent (bipartisan) abuse, I think there is tremendous value to what we do. The reason is because I believe that truth is inherently good and the pursuit of it an honorable enterprise. It's good for society and the individual. Making the pursuit of truth a daily habit builds good character, fostering principled beliefs yet open-mindedness. And, dare I say, it tends to make a person more moderate and tolerant.

I fully recognize that most people simply aren't receptive to a skeptical, dogged pursuit of "cold, hard facts." Social media has made that painfully obvious. But I think there is a minority of people who are open to scientific thinking and evidence-based policy. If for every 100 people we reach, we manage to change just a single mind, then we should count that as a success.

Notes

(1) Here at ACSH, we consider ourselves science communicators and consumer advocates, not journalists.

(2) It's weird getting anti-Semitic hate mail when you aren't Jewish.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diogenes#/media/File:Diogenes_looking_for_a_man_-_attributed_to_JHW_Tischbein.jpg

[2] <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/294384-if-you-intend-to-write-as-truthfully-as-you-can>