Academic Bias Against Industry Is Toxic Hypocrisy

By Alex Berezow, PhD — November 5, 2019

There is a pervasive bias in academia against scientists who work in industry. It is often said that such individuals aren’t "real scientists." The less charitable describe them as having gone over to the "dark side." For at least two reasons, this is a shameful and hypocritical way to characterize industry.

First, academic-industry partnerships are often extremely productive. The former provides the basic discoveries and theoretical foundations that the latter can implement in the form of real-world technologies. Several universities now have technology transfer offices whose goal is to patent (and profit from!) academic research by identifying industry partners that can bring a product to market. The university collects royalties if a product is successful.
Second, industry provides nearly 2/3 of all research funding in the United States. According to *R&D Magazine*, in 2019, industry paid for $375.8 billion of the $581 billion spent on research and development in the United States. If industry research were to disappear, America's dominance in science and technology would evaporate along with it.

For these reasons, industry should be celebrated, not derided. But that's not what we get. Instead, industry is routinely pilloried -- sometimes fairly, oftentimes unfairly -- both by academics and the media.
Writing in *Forbes* [2], astrophysicist Dr. Paul Sutter argues that Big Data is trouble for science. Why? He says:

> As science becomes more and more data heavy and leans more and more on Big Data techniques, the students who are naturally gifted or most talented or most passionate about Big Data aren't going to end up in science, they're going to end up in the industry. [Emphasis added]

That statement reveals that Dr. Sutter believes that (1) industry scientists aren't real scientists, and (2) it's bad if too many smart people are attracted to industry. Therefore, Big Data itself is bad. That's a curious line of reasoning, but such pretzel-twisting logic isn't uncommon.

Gorski (a.k.a. "Orac"), who blogs for Respectful Insolence and Science-Based Medicine, is also perpetually vigilant for corporate stooges. While he agrees with us that vaccines are vital to public health, he claims [3] that we only support vaccines because we're shills for Big Pharma, apparently notwithstanding the fact that our organization includes microbiologists, epidemiologists, and medical doctors, many of whom are academics.

This bizarre phenomenon of seeing shills everywhere one looks has also infected journalism. A team of journalists at NYU, led primarily by Charles Seife, routinely accuse others of malfeasance on behalf of industry. (One article written by Mr. Seife attacking plant geneticist Dr. Kevin Folta as an industry shill was so bad that it had to be retracted [4].) Yet, while Mr. Seife accuses all those around him of being industry shills, his employer NYU collected more than $1 billion in royalties for just a single drug [5] that it patented and licensed to Big Pharma.
The fervor with which the "corporate shill" label is applied is akin to McCarthyist zeal. That's unfortunate. The truth is that if the science is accurate, then it doesn't matter who paid for it — be it Monsanto, Vladimir Putin, or the Devil himself. Funding only matters if the science is inaccurate. That's when it's appropriate to ask, "Who funded this and why?"

Notes

(1) Yes, industry should be criticized when it behaves poorly.

(2) Dr. Gorski works for Wayne State University, which like many universities, has a technology transfer office. According to its website, "the University expects to receive a reasonable royalty" from industry if a technology it patents makes money. If Dr. Gorski's criteria apply equally to everyone, that would make his employer a corporate shill.