Editors at Journal 'Science' Call Me a Corporate Shill

By Alex Berezow, PhD — February 12, 2020

I pitched a column to the journal Science titled, "How I Became a Junk Science Debunker." It was initially accepted and went through two months (and nine rounds) of editing. At the last moment, however, the column was spiked by senior editor Tim Appenzeller (pictured). Why? Because I'm a corporate shill, of course.

Every decent science writer has, at some point in his or her career, been called a "corporate shill." It's a rite of passage.

If a science writer defends GMOs as safe and effective, he's called a Monsanto shill. If he says that vaccines are also safe and effective, he's a shill for Big Pharma. Defending America's conventional farmers results in being labeled a shill for Big Ag or Big Dairy. Stating the objective truth that our food supply is relatively safe results in being called a shill for Big Food. There's no way around it. If a science writer defends good science, he's called a shill.

The cretins making such accusations are the usual suspects: Anti-vaxxers, anti-GMO(rons), Kremlin propagandists [2], environmental activists, conspiracy theory websites like SourceWatch [3], the New York Times [4], food fad zealots, the New York Times [5], anonymous internet trolls, and the New York Times [6]. (Occasionally, the New York Times [7], the New York Times [8], the New York Times [9], and people named Carey [10], as well.)
What is completely unexpected is to see the "corporate shill" accusation coming from one of the world's most preeminent science journals. Yet, that just happened to me.

Editors at Journal 'Science' Call Me a Corporate Shill

The journal Science, published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), features a weekly column in which scientists write about challenges they faced and overcame during their careers.

I pitched a column in December, initially accepted by associate editor Dr. Katie Langin, titled, "How I Became a Junk Science Debunker." It detailed my journey from earning a PhD in microbiology to founding RealClearScience to landing at ACSH. During a follow-up phone call on January 31, Dr. Langin said that she was "fascinated" by my career path.

Finally, after two months and nine revisions (and, I might add, roughly 20 hours of work), the article was ready for publication. (You can read it here.) However, at the last minute, it was spiked by senior editor Tim Appenzeller. Why? Well, I'm a corporate shill, of course. See the screenshot of the email below:
Hi Alex,

Thanks again for your work on the essay. It now does a very nice job of sharing your personal journey, but I’m afraid I have some bad news to share: We’ve decided that we can’t move forward with publication. I didn’t realize this when I was editing your essay, but it’s come to our attention that the organization you work for has been the subject of controversy because it has accepted money from corporations. This doesn’t make your story less valid, but we’re concerned that criticism of your employer may cause the career message in your essay to be lost, which would undermine the purpose of publishing it. I’m sorry that we didn’t recognize this problem earlier, and I hope that you’ll understand. We do very much appreciate the effort you put into the essay and we’re sorry that we will be unable to publish it.

Sincerely,

ACSH is controversial "because it has accepted money from corporations." Uh-huh. The journal Science itself proudly solicits money from corporations [13], boasting that its expensive ads provide
the "marketing solutions" and brand enhancement necessary to "accomplish your company's goals." Science is literally begging to be a corporate shill.

This is now a story all by itself. In a written communication, an employee of Science tells me that corporate money is controversial, while Science shamelessly solicits it.

Now, Dr. Langin and Mr. Appenzeller need to answer some questions. I sent them both the following:

1) The Science Careers page has published columns by scientists who work or worked for industry, one of them rather prominently titled, "Three lessons from industry that I'm taking back to academia." So, your stated reason to reject my article ("corporate money") is false. What's the real reason for the rejection? Is it political?

2) The journal Science itself happily accepts corporate donations in the form of advertising revenue. Please explain this contradiction.

3) Do you believe that corporate science is inherently untrustworthy? If so, then why does Science publish papers written by industry co-authors?

4) Do you believe that ACSH is dishonest or untrustworthy? Do you believe that I am dishonest or untrustworthy? If so, why?

5) During the editing process, you added an anti-conservative insult to my career story, which I asked you to remove. Are anti-conservative sympathies part of the culture at Science and AAAS?
I gave them 24 hours to respond. Let's see how honest they are.

Notes

(1) This is incredibly ironic, as my column specifically discussed how ad hominem attacks such as "corporate shill" are one of the many challenges that science writers face.

(2) During the editing process, Dr. Langin added an insult aimed at conservatives, which I asked her to remove. In one segment of my column, I listed several insults directed at me over the years -- liar, vaccine pusher, corporate shill. She added in "liberal egghead," assuming that all my critics were on the Right. They are not. In fact, they are mostly on the Left.

(3) Update: February 12, 2010 @ 3:55 pm ET. Just as I suspected, they aren't honest, although I'm surprised Tim Appenzeller responded. (Dr. Langin did not.) His response, along with my comments, are published here [14].