Journalist Peter Fairley Cites Anti-Vaxx Website, Spreads Misinformation on Flu, COVID-19

By Alex Berezow, PhD — March 24, 2020

Peter Fairley, an environmental journalist and contributing editor for MIT Technology Review, cited an anti-vaccine website, DeSmogBlog, in a smear directed at our organization. Simultaneously, he spread misinformation about influenza and COVID-19 and endorses advice that contradicts that of the CDC and World Health Organization.

We have gotten used to trolls and political ideologues spreading misinformation about public health. But it's still a surprise when alleged science journalists do it.

We already detailed how DeSmogBlog -- a climate activist website headed by an anti-vaxxer -- deliberately and maliciously twisted our articles on COVID-19 out of context to claim that we "downplayed" the threat. Their lies, unfortunately, are being repeated uncritically by some journalists. Now, we have caught MIT Technology Review contributing editor Peter Fairley lying about ACSH, influenza, COVID-19, and public health.

On Sunday, Fairley tweeted this:
Lie #1. We aren't funded by Exxon Mobil. (We have been in the past. We are not now. And what difference does it make? "Guilt by association" is a logical fallacy. We tell the truth about science, regardless of who pays for it [5]. See Lie #3 below.)

Lie #2. We never "assured readers that there was little to worry about" in regard to COVID-19. That accusation was literally fabricated whole-cloth by DeSmogBlog. Fairley didn't even bother to check if the article he tweeted was accurate.

Lie #3. Climate change isn't one of our topics because we don't have experts on the subject. On the rare occasions we address the topic, we have proposed nuclear power as a solution to anthropogenic climate change [6]. (Would Exxon Mobil be happy about us endorsing nuclear power?)

One tweet. Three lies. And Peter Fairley fancies himself an environmental and energy journalist. And apparently a public health expert, too.

**Peter Fairley Spreads Misinformation on Influenza, COVID-19**

It is simply an objective fact that Fairley spread disinformation. So, we pointed it out to him on Twitter, indicating that we declared COVID-19 a global health crisis a full week before the World Health Organization. Instead of acknowledging that he was wrong, he doubled down. And lied again.
We never said that there is "nothing to fear." Also, anyone who is capable of simple arithmetic would be forced to conclude that, at this point in time, influenza is a far, far bigger health threat than COVID-19.

Influenza (annual figures)
- Infections: Up to 1 billion
- Deaths: 300,000 to 500,000

COVID-19 (figures as of today)
- Infections: 400,000+
- Deaths: 18,000+

As we wrote previously [7], there are variables that could eventually make COVID-19 a bigger global health threat than influenza. However, the sheer volume of influenza cases overwhelms COVID-19, even though the latter has a higher case-fatality rate.

Fairley won't give in that easily, though. He wants to know if I'm a real microbiologist. (I have a PhD.) After all, he has a bachelor's degree in molecular biology, so how could anyone question him? He's an expert.
Two words: Dunning-Kruger effect [8].

Fairly isn't done yet. He knows so much about public health, that he's willing to contradict the CDC and WHO on face masks. He retweeted a tweet by Dan Fagin -- an NYU professor with no scientific or medical training who also suffers from Dunning-Kruger syndrome -- on the need for every person to wear a face mask.
Do the right thing and don't hoard masks? No.

*Do the right thing and don't buy a face mask at all.* Why? Because medical staff and sick people need them, not healthy people. That's the recommendation of both the CDC and WHO. In fact, the World Health Organization's advice is explicit: "If you are healthy, you only need to wear a mask if you are taking care of a person with suspected 2019-nCoV infection."

Clearly, Fagin (with his bachelor's degree in government) and Fairley know better than the PhDs and MDs who work at the CDC and WHO. That's why they're super-smart science journalists, don't cha know.
Update: 24-March-2020 @ 3:17 pm ET. You can't make this stuff up. Peter Fairley is back. This time, he quoted Crossfit. (Seriously?)

The article was written by Carey Gillam. She doesn't like us very much because we're pro-biotechnology and she's anti-GMO. In fact, she works for the anti-GMO activist group U.S. Right to Know [12], whose funding largely comes from an organization that peddles conspiracy theories [13] such as anti-vaxxerism, 9/11 trutherism, chemtrails, and FEMA's secret plan to implement martial law.

At some point, Peter Fairley will realize he's in a hole and will stop digging. Maybe.

Update: 24-March-2020 @ 3:37 pm ET. Nope. He's still digging. He can't help himself.