Grist Publishes Lies from Conspiracy Theorist, Smear Merchant Paul Thacker

By Alex Berezow, PhD — February 16, 2021

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ACSH was founded in 1978 to fight back against misinformation in the media, primarily involving the safety of food and "chemicals." We have been debunking "fake news" decades before the term came into existence.

As you might expect, calling out bullsh** has caused us to rack up quite a list of enemies. But if one can tell the character of a man by who his enemies are, then ACSH is certainly doing something right. We are proud that charlatans like Dr. Oz and public health scourges like anti-vaxxers and anti-GMO activists consider us an enemy. This proves (to us, anyway) that -- to the best of our ability -- we are on the side of evidence-based science and policy.

This makes our enemies mad. They know they can't debate us on scientific grounds, so they go after us with ad hominem attacks or guilt by association. Sometimes, they manipulate the media into regurgitating these lies and distortions. But as our loyal readers know, we don't sit idly by while malicious actors spread disinformation. We fight back.
Grist Publishes Smears from Conspiracy Theorist Paul Thacker

The latest attack comes from someone we know well, Paul Thacker, an anti-GMO, anti-5G conspiracy theorist who has a strange obsession with ACSH. He has a long, sordid history of using Twitter to endlessly harass scientists and science writers. To give you an idea of the true extent of his malicious behavior, a former colleague of Thacker’s -- who once thought of him as a promising journalist -- said that he turned into a "sadistic troll." Tamar Haspel, who writes for the Washington Post, penned an entire article about Thacker's unethical behavior. An article Thacker wrote for PLOS got retracted.

None of this matters to Thacker, of course, and apparently it doesn't matter to the few outlets left where he can still publish his defamation. This time, Thacker is writing for Grist, and he repeats the same lies and half-truths that he always does. Here's what he wrote about ACSH:

In September, the New York Times published an article that cited microbiologist Alex Berezow of the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) as an expert on coronavirus misinformation. But the Times did not note that Berezow is the organization’s VP of science communications — which is problematic because ACSH has over the years received funding from the likes of Chevron, Coca-Cola, Bayer, Monsanto, McDonald’s, and the tobacco conglomerate Altria. [Emphasis added]

What does my expertise on coronavirus misinformation have to do with ACSH's funding sources from years, if not decades, ago? Nothing. Note that he doesn't actually criticize anything I've ever written. Why? Because he can't. He couldn't tell the difference between a rock and a Petri plate or anything related to science and health, so he does the only thing he knows to do: Character assassination. As Tamar Haspel put it, "Thacker's gonna thack."

It is important to note that ACSH's funding sources have changed dramatically in recent years. Today, almost all of our funding comes from individuals and private foundations. Less than 5% comes from industry or trade groups. Besides, if our past funding is a legitimate issue, then why isn't Thacker's or Grist's funding? As always, "Transparency standards are for thee, not for me."

Thacker goes on:

Berezow has also attacked Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists at the Times for exposing corporate ties between academics and the agrochemical industry. Readers deserve to be informed of such associations. [Emphasis added]

This is simultaneously an appeal to authority and a lie. The fact that a journalist has a Pulitzer Prize means absolutely nothing if they get the facts in a story wrong. My criticism of the New York Times has nothing to do with its investigations of corporate influence; instead, it is solely based on their long track record of lying about food, chemicals, and biotechnology. The Times has also
promoted alternative medicine and witchcraft [9]. So yes, they deserve criticism when they fail so spectacularly.

I contacted Grist's editor-in-chief (Nikhil Swaminathan) and opinions editor (Jennifer Block) with much of the above information. They didn't care. They didn't bother checking with us to see if the allegations are true. So, I demanded a chance to respond but was not given one. Here's the response I received from Block:

Thanks for your email. We thoroughly vetted and fact-checked this piece and don't see any specific allegations in your email that anything is incorrect or warrants correction. ACSH's past funders have been widely reported. We note your claim about current funding but can not verify it based on the limited financials provided on the web site.

You are welcome to post a comment in response to the piece via Facebook; it will also show up on the post on our site. [Emphasis added]

They thoroughly vetted and fact-checked a piece that spread blatant lies about ACSH and several other scientists mentioned, like Dr. Kevin Folta? Nonsense. Almost certainly, Block "fact-checked" the article using conspiracy websites like SourceWatch [10], which are edited by people like Paul Thacker using a pseudonym. (We have identified several of these pseudonyms, and they consistently appear in Wikipedia and SourceWatch.) In other words, the "facts" are generated anonymously, and then quoted by media outlets as if they're the truth. It's lazy, dishonest, and unacceptable.

And instead of giving a scientist the right to respond, I am instead pointed to the Facebook comments section. What a joke.

Deceitful "journalists" like Paul Thacker and negligent editors like Nikhil Swaminathan and Jennifer Block have no concern for the truth. Thus, they have no business being in media. No wonder there is such a crisis of confidence in American institutions.

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