

# Mythosphere: Brockovich at Harvard, Seavey in Vegas, Crichton in NYC, and More (with cartoon by Marvin Winter)

By ACSH Staff — October 20, 2005

Does empirical reality matter? Or, to borrow a term from the title of a folklore journal, do modern minds live in a sort of "mythosphere," concerned only with their own perceptions?

As ACSH president Dr. Elizabeth Whelan [has lamented](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, activist Erin Brockovich received an award this week from the Harvard School of Public Health even though it is only in the movie named after Brockovich that she's advanced public health -- in the real world, Brockovich's anti-chemical crusades are not based on good science.

But does anyone really care? In the public imagination, Brockovich is a hero, and to most people's minds, the true villain is always someone (perhaps an ACSH staff member) who deflates a myth, ruins a good story, or forces people to rethink. There are several forces conspiring, perhaps inevitably, to keep us away from the truth:

☞The media loves a "good story" (and that usually means heroes and villains, without too many complications) <sup>[2]</sup>.

☞Politicians of *all* factions have always been members of something other than the "reality-based community," since they are generally interested in mobilizing support and stirring passions, not managing mundane practical details.

☞Faith, of course, is the brazen denial of the need for evidence.

☞The left, influenced by decades of deconstructionism, relativism, and belief in "social consensus" as the basis of truth, behaves as if silencing doubters can make things true.

☞Similarly, academia is now full of so-called Continental theorists, more in love with the abstractions of Hegel or Lacan than the "Anglo-American" tradition of empiricism -- so full of them, in fact, that places like the Yale philosophy department (in the 90s) and the University of Chicago political science department (today) have found themselves deadlocked when attempting to hire or grant tenure to professors who don't dance to the Continental tune (though [some very special Belgians, apparently, appreciated the recent FactsAndFears piece "Don't Believe Everything You Read..."](#) <sup>[3]</sup>).

☞Environmentalists seem guided more by an agrarian aesthetic than hard science.

☞We hear countless variations on the alternative-medicine lie that "the mind-body connection," not conventional medicine, is the key to healing.

¢And for all the wonders that capitalism undeniably bestows on us, one has to wonder what effect capitalist media saturation has on our attention spans. Appealing short-hand versions of reality are easier to come by than thorough, cautious analysis.

As the band MC 900ft. Jesus sang back in 1990, "Truth Is Out Style." What to do?

Well, for lack of a better idea, just keep trying to get the facts out in as many ways as possible, hoping that bits of truth will at least become *part* of the larger mythosphere. Some recent or imminent efforts:

¢The ever-growing universe of blogs helps to quickly draw attention to outrages like the Brockovich award (take [this fine example from Walter Olson on the blog PointOfLaw](#) [4]).

¢Believe it or not, I'LL BE APPEARING IN VEGAS ON NOVEMBER 4 AND 5 -- speaking on two panels at *Reason* magazine's "[Dynamic Cities](#)" conference [5], that is. During three days' worth of talk about regulatory matters and freedom, I'll discuss the very serious problem of smoking on one panel (and the danger of smoking becoming a hip symbol of freedom instead of a rightly-feared health menace) and the more pleasant problem of how to form online communities (such as the community of FactsAndFears readers) on another panel. (Perhaps the coldest bucket of liquid reality will be thrown on this libertarian gathering by pollster Frank Luntz, though, since he is slated to speak on "What Americans Really Think About Government, and Why We Should Be Afraid.")

¢Once in a while, very quietly, the press acknowledges that its own worst-case-scenario reports were merely dark fantasies, but it usually does so quietly, well after the initial reports have shaped public perceptions and political responses, as when Katrina hurricane death toll reports were scaled down from over 10,000 to about 1,000 -- something I had anticipated, despite the somewhat [funereal tone](#) [6] of my own [recent articles](#) [7] on [New Orleans](#) [8].

¢Similarly, it helps when reporters with a little greater than average expertise point out truths that lesser reporters might ignore in favor of mythmaking: WebMD's Miranda Hill, for instance, reported on October 4 that U.S. cancer death rates have been dropping since the early 1990s, which doesn't jibe with the usual "cancer epidemic" warnings we hear about modern living (the fact that the all-too-familiar menace of smoking, not some mysterious industrial chemical, remains the number one cause of cancer, is a reminder that exotic, exciting explanations aren't always useful ones).

¢Alas, much as I love Frankenstein and the [countless variations](#) [9] on the story, sci-fi doomsday scenarios have almost single-handedly shaped that section of the mythosphere related to biotech, so it's wonderful to read ACSH colleague and *Reason* science editor Ron Bailey's new book, [Liberation Biology](#) [10], which for once presents an exhilaratingly positive view of biotech's potential and what it will mean in terms of increased human happiness, health, and longevity.

¢Meanwhile, England's Frank Furedi, in his new book [The Politics of Fear](#) [11], which I've [mentioned before](#) [12], makes the interesting argument that no more grand hopes, myths, utopias, reform plans, or visions for the future are possible -- and thus no sweeping political or social reforms -- so long as political debate is paralyzed by fear of even tiny negative consequences (someone somewhere will almost always suffer slightly decreased income, a layoff, an allergic

reaction, or just a sense of alienation in the face of any substantial change in society, whether technological or cultural).

¢A one-man embodiment of the power of both fear and optimism is Dr. Michael Crichton, who has contributed to the mythosphere such nightmarish visions as a deadly virus from space and robot cowboys run amok -- but who knows when it's time to inject a note of calm into his fiction, as in [his book \*State of Fear\*](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, in which eco-scaremongers are the villains. For this philosophically significant shift in emphasis -- and the educational *State of Fear* footnotes and similarly-themed essays Crichton has written in opposition to junk science -- ACSH will present Crichton with its 2005 Sound Science Award on November 4 here in New York City. Think of it as ACSH's thank-you to someone who has recognized his own power over the mythosphere and is using it for good.

¢One of Crichton's and ACSH's favorite examples of a myth disguising an ugly reality is the widespread and unfortunate belief that banning the insecticide DDT was a great success for the environmental movement. As [Roger Bate and Richard Tren testified before the Senate](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, though, while banning that insecticide makes for a good environmentalist story, the ban takes a tragic real-life toll among victims of mosquito-borne malaria.

¢And when all else fails, you can sue. Perceptions can be as wrong as possible, but the force of law (for good or ill, usually ill) has a way of settling arguments. For instance, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has just over one month to go before the legal deadline by which they are supposed to reply to ACSH's lawsuit over EPA's failure to use good science in crafting regulations -- specifically, the over-cautious anti-chemical regulations that trigger so many needless health scares. "E-Day" will be November 21, and that's when, if we're very, very lucky, the EPA as we know it will disappear in a puff of smoke.

¢Today also saw the House's passage of a bill protecting restaurants and food manufacturers from absurd lawsuits blaming them for obesity. You can make up any myth you like about how the local hamburger place is plotting to kill you and robbing you of willpower, but knowing you can't get any money for it would diminish the incentive to engage in such paranoia.

Even drastically changing the law doesn't necessarily correct people's thinking, of course, but removing unnecessary regulations and groundless lawsuits at least gives people more freedom to move comfortably and fearlessly within this foggy mythosphere, which may be an important first step to changing the mythosphere's tone to one decidedly more optimistic -- perhaps something akin Art Deco-era futurism, instead of this cloud of false fears and false heroes.

Instead of credulity and terror, we need more skepticism to fight off the nonsense and, as Nietzsche suggested, the good humor (see Cartoon 1) to laugh off the nonsense when rational arguments can't prevail.

Todd Seavey edits [HealthFactsAndFears.com](#) <sup>[15]</sup> and is Director of Publications at the American Council on Science and Health ([ACSH.org](#) <sup>[16]</sup>).

More Marvin Winter cartoons can be found [here](#) <sup>[17]</sup>, [here](#) <sup>[18]</sup>, [here](#) <sup>[19]</sup>, [here](#) <sup>[20]</sup>, and [here](#) <sup>[21]</sup>.

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**Links**

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- [2] [http://www.acsh.org/publications/pubID.1130/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.acsh.org/publications/pubID.1130/pub_detail.asp)
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- [12] [http://www.acsh.org/factsfears/newsID.644/news\\_detail.asp](http://www.acsh.org/factsfears/newsID.644/news_detail.asp)
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