

Counter-Point: Activists Operate By Outrage, Not Fear

By *Andras Baneth* — October 9, 2015

You have probably seen the most recent attack (warning: crackpot link) on [Professor Kevin Folta of the University of Florida, Gainesville](#) ^[1] by activists who see conspiracy and collusion everywhere. You have likely been witness to pseudo-scientific rants against everything from (warning: crackpot links) [GMOs](#) ^[2] and [glyphosate](#) ^[3] to just about every chemical. You may even have noted the stratospheric rise of the Food Babe and believed that calling her the *Fear Babe* would expose her methods to the audience. Certainly if you have fretted about the world's leading anti-establishment, paranoid website, Natural News, you may have concluded that the secret to its success is tapping into our innermost emotion: fear.

But you would be wrong.

It is certainly true that activists and websites preying on their audiences' lack of scientific literacy often exploit that ignorance and engage in fear-mongering, but this does not account for their total success.

Fear alone is more paralyzing than mobilizing. Activists use two other emotions to get positive outcomes for their causes: **outrage** and **empowerment**.

In his seminal book "[Contagious](#) ^[4]," Jonah Berger analyzed thousands of the most shared *New York Times* articles to identify common traits in them. What he found was that outrage was more likely to trigger a reader to share the article with their friends and social networks than fear.

Why? Because outrage, as opposed to fear, implies that you actually *can* do something about the injustice that the writer has just unearthed. If an activist says 'You are being poisoned by company X, and you can boycott them' it is much more empowering than simply saying 'You are being poisoned by company X.'

If you can create an enemy and a viable course of action, **outrage** is the way to go.

If you examine the most popular activist groups, they all operate according to this formula: they pick an enemy they can depict as the arrogant "Goliath", a corporation that cares only about profits, then they find an issue or product simple enough to be understood by the people who read sites like Natural Resources Defense Council or Environmental Working Group (ideally something people eat or use daily, so there is first-hand experience with it) and then they 'reveal' an outrageous fact about it.

Once they have created fear and anger, they provide an action plan their audience can easily follow - sign a petition, spam a government representative, switch to an alternative product or make a donation to the activist group. They are always certain to make the tribe feel they are

(warning: crackpot link) [part of a community](#) [5], and that they act for a cause larger than themselves. Then these hyper-empowered, angry zombies will follow instructions - after all, they are all fighting for the public good against the evil that was trying to scam them into some deadly product or behavior.

But that is not the only option. While outrage and a call to action work very well, it occasionally has to be coupled with something more positive, something that makes people feel good about themselves, not just as fighters, but as the ethically superior people they all strive to be.

That positive element is **empowerment**. Along with picking fights against actual science and medicine, most activists like to alternate with inspiring stories about (warning: crackpot links) [how someone ate their way out of cancer](#) [6], how they lost weight by detoxing, and [how they can find solace in their hectic lives](#). [7]

This not only generates positive vibes, it also has a great spillover effect for the activist: the positive emotions will be attributed to the person who triggered them, leading to increased trust and goodwill towards the author.

Loop back to outrage and you have the magic formula for long-lasting success!

Simply saying that activists are operating by fear misses part of the cultural equation. If farmers, companies and pro-science advocates instead understand the whole spectrum of pseudoscience logic, they [can fight such junk 'science' better](#) [8], and perhaps leverage these methods for their own cause...the public good.

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Links

[1] http://www.naturalnews.com/051129_Kevin_Folta_false_claims_violence.html

[2] <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2013/08/06/genetic-modification.aspx>

[3] <http://www.motherearthnews.com/nature-and-environment/environmental-policy/dangers-of-glyphosate-herbicide-zmgz13onzsto.aspx>

[4] <http://jonahberger.com/books/contagious/>

[5] <http://foodbabe.com/subscribe/>

[6] http://www.naturalnews.com/048617_cancer_natural_healing_holistic_doctors.html

[7] <http://www.davidwolfe.com/category/nature/>

[8] <http://www.psandman.com/index-OM.htm>