

The Death Of Science Journalism



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Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diogenes#/media/File:Diogenes_looking_for_a_man_-_attributed_to_JHW_Tischbein.jpg)

Journalism isn't what it used to be.

Decades ago, it was a widely respected career. Every night, people would gather around their television sets to watch the nightly news. There weren't many options to choose from, and Walter Cronkite was easily the most famous. He was so influential, that a myth (<https://mediamythalert.wordpress.com/2013/04/27/a-cronkite-moment-in-the-war-on-terror-there-never-was-a-cronkite-moment/>) widely believed to this day circulated about him: When Cronkite declared the Vietnam War a stalemate, President Lyndon Johnson supposedly remarked, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America."

He never did say that, but the kernel of truth at the heart of the myth still rings loud and true: There was a time when Americans trusted the news.

How times have changed. According to Gallup (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>), Americans' trust in the media has fallen from 72% in 1976 to 32% in 2016. The partisan divide is striking: Trust among Democrats (51%) is higher than among Independents (30%) and Republicans (14%). When asked their opinion of the honesty and ethics of various professions (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>), journalists perform rather poorly, ranking below chiropractors and bankers and just above lawyers.

The partisan divide is easy to explain. Among journalists, Democrats outnumber Republicans by about 4 to 1 (https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2014/07/an_outbreak_of_political_correctness_in_science_media.html). It's naive to believe that such a partisan imbalance has no effect on the tone or quality of press coverage.

However, it is doubtful that fact alone accounts for the widespread distrust of journalists. After all, among scientists, Democrats outnumber Republicans by 9 to 1 (<http://www.people-press.org/2009/07/09/section-4-scientists-politics-and-religion/>), but the public still respects them (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/18/most-americans-trust-the-military-and-scientists-to-act-in-the-publics-interest/>). So, what's going on?

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In a word: Lying. Many journalists have an ideological axe to grind, and if the truth is on their side, great. If not, who cares?

Instead of the "L-word," civilized people are supposed to use euphemisms, such as "one-sided" or "not the whole story." But let's put the faux propriety aside. Purposefully presenting only half the story is a form of lying. Any story can be radically reinterpreted using only partial truths: For example, there once was a very lonely, elderly woman who lived in the forest and gave lost children food and a place to sleep. That sounds sweet, if we leave out the part where she tries to cook and eat them.

Journalism in general is very guilty of this, but so is science journalism. That is particularly distressing, since science journalists perceive themselves as data-driven truth-tellers. A long track record shows otherwise.

Consider the *New York Times*. Journalist Danny Hakim regularly lies about GMOs and glyphosate (<https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/03/15/glyphosate-nyts-danny-hakim-lying-you-11001>), while others "teach the controversy" (<https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/07/31/nyt-greenmails-ben-jerrys-teaches-controversy-glyphosate-11633>). Still other journalists, like Eric Lipton (<https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/10/26/nyts-eric-lipton-science-birther-12039>), smear the integrity of scientists, if they are thought to be pro-industry. Op-ed writer Nicholas Kristof goes on chemophobic diatribes (<https://www.acsh.org/news/2015/06/04/chemicals-in-your-popcorn-asks-the-times-kristof-yes-there-are>) about scary chemicals. The NYT has touted the (non-existent) benefits of acupuncture. Writers Michael Pollan and Mark Bittman promote thoroughly unscientific organic food, while the NYT's publisher's wife sits on the board of Whole Foods. The paper then has the audacity to accuse actual scientists of conflicts of interest.

Here's the truly terrifying part: Those are just the transgressions of the *New York Times*. Name nearly any other media outlet, and an equally long list could be produced.

Recently, the website Undark, whose publisher is science writer Deborah Blum, published an op-ed by an environmental activist who told lies and half-truths about the safety of glyphosate (<https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/11/29/undark-joins-dark-side-gmos-12217>). This was particularly striking because the website's editorial team and advisory board have several high-profile names in science journalism, and the site's stated mission is "true journalistic coverage of the sciences."

Given that I had admired her writings in chemistry -- and have communicated with her multiple times on friendly terms -- I gave her the opportunity to respond prior to publishing my criticism. When she did not respond, I took to Twitter, where I asked somebody at Undark to take responsibility for this "dumpster fire" of an article. This was Ms. Blum's response:



Deborah Blum

@deborahblum

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Replying to @AlexBerezow @undarkmag and 3 others

It's an op-ed, Alex. Get a grip.

4:40 AM - 30 Nov 2017



1



That's a stunning admission from a journalist. In other words, because it's an op-ed, facts don't matter. Buzz off. Would her response be the same if Undark published an article questioning evolution, climate change, or vaccines? For the sake of the truth, let's hope not.

The Plight of Diogenes

It's been said that Diogenes (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diogenes>) lit a lamp during the day because he was looking for an honest man. His pain is felt today. I've been looking for an honest journalist. I'm still looking.

