

THE GALILEO FALLACY

Climate contrarians and the crisis of credibility

NO ONE WOULD WANT a novelist to perform brain surgery with his pen. No one would want a zoologist to then write textbooks claiming those misadventures as best medical practice.

Society understands the architecture of academia and knows there are specific rooms of neuroscientists, windowsills of botanists, stories of epidemiologists, a turretful of astrophysicists. Most individuals have enough sense to know when they reach the limits of their knowledge. The media accepts the idea of specializations and accords greater respect to those with greater expertise. With one exception: climate science.

When it comes to this academic discipline, it seems that if you have a zoology doctorate on sexual selection in pheasants (this is true), editors will seek your contrarian view more avidly than if you have qualifications in climate science and a lifetime's professional expertise. The press is littered with climate "heretics" with academic backgrounds in history, the classics, or literature. Not climate science.

I recently watched a debate between a climate scientist and that pheasant-expert-turned-journalist, who also had an unfortunate background in banking. (He was chairman of the bank Northern Rock up to its ignominious collapse in 2007, and was accused in Parliament of "harming the reputation" of British banking. Whoops.)

An audience member asked: "Please could you explain how it is that you are 'right' while all climate scientists are wrong?" He could not. I almost felt sorry for him. I know he has lectured publicly on scientific heresy. I think he wants to be Galileo.

Contrary to the beliefs of some contrarians, academia welcomes the galileos and encourages skepticism: It wants its hypotheses robustly tested precisely because it wants to pass those tests. It has a stern system of peer review; it is judicious and conscientious. For sure, it can be tedious, no caveat too small, no qualification too painstaking, no reference too abstruse. (Herodotus, we'll be with you shortly.) It may spend years debating the infinitesimal advantage of crenelation over machicolation of its ivory towers until it

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is disturbed by a terse demand from wider society to come down to earth.

This demand usually means asking academia to justify itself in terms of business and money. But what if it were asked to justify itself in the name of public knowledge? What if it were required to play a role right at the heart of democracy?

Society needs the integrity and expertise of academics in the puzzling out of

some of its biggest quandaries: issues of nuclear power, health, genetics, social justice, and climate science above all. A democracy then needs that knowledge disseminated through the press, but the media's ambition to be entertaining and provocative too often overrules its respect for intellectual rigor. Journalists cannot hold degrees in every subject they report on, but their job is not to pretend they know the science better than the experts.

The BBC and Britain's newspapers regularly print and broadcast opinions opposing climate science by a novelist who describes himself as the author of "fantastically entertaining" books. *Fantastical* is the word. Qualified he is not. But the media, wanting to be part of the celebrity culture it stalks and skedaddling toward

infotainment, is losing sight of the core purpose of its activity: to be a truthful messenger, in this case between the world of academia and the public.

Pseudojournalism has the upper hand on both sides of the Atlantic. Dazzle camouflage for battleships of propaganda, the garbled plethora of junkformation, a blare of urgent nonsense that seems designed to have an effect more physiological than

intellectual: it makes its audience tense, on alert, jittery, prey to misinformation.

When one climate scientist in the States became utterly frustrated and despairing about the propagandist misinformation put out by an odious fossil fuel-funded think tank, he went undercover to get them to reveal details of their funding and their plans for introducing climate contrarianism into schools. To some, his action was unethical, while to others he was a hero of democracy. The greater question, though, is not whether he should

have gone undercover but why on earth no investigative journalist did so.

And now over to Herodotus, our man in Athens. Democracy in ancient Greece was designed to increase the knowledge available to its citizens (as academia does) and to aid discussion of that knowledge (as the media should), leading to good policy decisions. The historian Herodotus reports an early debate over what to do with a windfall from mining. The citizens had a choice. Either each individual could benefit from some instant cash, or the wealth could be used for long-term collective benefit. Well informed, and after long discussion, they chose the latter, a decision whose wisdom history validated. This was a self-respecting citizenry that wanted to be worthy of its own abstract nouns, democracy above all, and that believed, as I do, that when people are given good information, they usually make good decisions.

“A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to Farce or Tragedy or perhaps both,” wrote U.S. president James Madison. Farce has been provided by the

likes of “Burlesque-only,” the Italian primate who aped the part of politician and controlled a twisted media so successfully that Italy has now lost its democracy altogether and is ruled by unelected bankers.



Tragedy comes in the form of climate change, and the media’s repeated trumpeting of misinformation is not only a breach of the social contract with the present but also with the future.

Miscount a handful of votes and a nation will rightly protest. Repeatedly misinform that nation and the law will not care, ruling as it infamously did that Fox News has the right to lie or distort news. Mislead a world about climate change and the future is at stake. Being adequately informed is a democratic duty just as the vote is a democratic right. A misinformed electorate, voting without knowledge, is not a true democracy.

Cue the graphics. I’m proposing a system of certification for media articles in which there is a clear issue of social responsibility. Certified articles should bear a symbol or stamp of quality assurance, be awarded by teams of academics, and be given to the article, not the journalist, recognizing the facts, not the personality. It should be awarded when the article is accurate and uses reliable sources and peer-reviewed studies. There already exists the Climate Science Rapid Response Team,

which answers questions at short notice to help journalists achieve accuracy. The formality of a certification symbol is necessary, though, for the reader to know whether to trust an article. Accuracy must not only be achieved but be seen to have been achieved.

The certification should be voluntary. I’m not against entertainment: if someone wants to read fantastically entertaining stories about a man giving birth to an eight-foot baby with flying saucers for toes, good luck to them, but I resent the appearance of parity between two articles

on an issue as serious as climate change when one article is actually gibberish masked in pseudoscience and the other is well informed and accurate.

When the pheasant expert proffered his climate-heretic views in a hugely popular book, the journal *New Scientist* gave his work to a handful of specialists. According to them, the author “completely ignores the mainstream scientific literature” and “has a very poor understanding of the core issues,” “compares apples and eggs,” and “introduces confusion.” He “missed many of the important points and concepts” and “cherry-picked evidence to form opinions which are unsupported by the bulk of scientific evidence.” His work was an “unfortunate misrepresentation,” which was “misleading,” an “unbalanced contribution,” and an “ideological account.”

So, no certification there, then. The author has, I think, fallen victim to what I call the Galileo fallacy. Just because Galileo was a heretic doesn’t make every heretic a Galileo. ☞

Jay Griffiths is the author of A Love Letter from a Stray Moon.