
When You're Criticized¹

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What should you do when you or your organization is subject to lengthy, published criticism that you think is seriously distorting and misleading? The three main options are to ignore the criticisms, to counter-attack, and to respond with information and arguments. To make a choice, it is important to assess the way audiences' perceptions are likely to be influenced by your response.

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Criticism is an everyday occurrence. Nearly every gossip session involves criticism of someone not present. Here, I want to look at a particular type of criticism: that which is open, published, and presented at some length. Some examples are

- David Brock's attack on Anita Hill, the woman who spoke out about sexual harassment by US Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas²
- criticisms of non-violent action, including claims that individuals and organizations promoting non-violent action are serving the interests of the US government³
- criticisms of climate change science, including claims that climate change scientists are misguided, biased, and fraudulent⁴

These sorts of criticisms can occur in politics, science, economics, and a host of other areas. They often include attempts to lower the credibility of someone who has a reputation in a particular area.

Before the Internet, publishing lengthy criticisms could be difficult in cases because editors and publishers of books, newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals exerted a restraining influence. Today, by using webpages and blogs, it is much easier to publish these sorts of criticism to a wide audience. It is also easier to reply.

Cass Sunstein, in his essay *On Rumours*, notes that the Internet makes it easier for falsehoods to spread. The so-called marketplace of ideas often does not work to eradicate false ideas, in part because of the effect of several psychological processes. In informational cascades, people believe something because others do. In conformity cascades, people censor themselves when they see others taking a position contrary to their own perceptions. Finally, members of like-minded groups are likely to have more extreme views after discussing them. The communication capacities of the Internet can facilitate each of these processes, leading to substantial groups of people believing falsehoods and being resistant to correction.⁵

Criticisms can be distressing, especially when they are personal or when they target valued beliefs. It can be tempting to counter-attack with equally hostile prose. But before responding in the heat of the moment, it is worth examining several options and the likely impact of each one.

To illustrate the points here, I will use a sample attack. For convenience, it is brief, though the sorts of attacks I'm concerned with are long, up to book length.

Imagine that you are Chris Smith and a long critique of your work and life appears on a blog written by Jamie Zust, the key elements of which are this: 'Smith has been accepting money from the Alpha Foundation, which has ties with the Panzer Alliance, a terrorist organization. Smith has demonstrated serious bias due to this connection and has misrepresented the terminal convention. Smith is a liar in the service of terrorists.'

NOT RESPONDING

The easiest option is to not reply. This is usually low risk when the critics have little credibility or visibility compared to the person being attacked. Think of a high-profile person, like Nelson Mandela, who is subject to political criticism. If his critics are obscure and are published in little-read magazines, then Mandela is better off ignoring them. In fact, to reply would give these critics much greater visibility and credibility—it would be seen as taking them seriously.⁶ However, if the critics are high profile and their criticisms are reported in widely read outlets, then not responding is more risky. Suppose Mandela is criticized by other African leaders and the criticisms are reported in leading newspapers. Then,

under the assumption that ‘silence implies consent,’ not responding might be interpreted as accepting the criticisms.

Another problem with not responding is that it can be seen as arrogant—as refusing to engage in debate. Suppose a controversial issue is being debated—say, abortion or vaccination—and a radio station invites figures from each side to participate in a discussion. If, in the hypothetical situation, you say, ‘I won’t speak if Jamie Zust is on the same program,’ this might look bad.⁷ You need to ask questions like, ‘Will people pay any attention to what Jamie Zust says about me?’ and ‘If I ignore Zust’s attack, will it cause me any damage?’

There is another consideration. Perhaps you are a dissident or a member of a marginal group and have had the experience that your criticisms of dominant ideas or powerful organizations are perpetually ignored. What you would like most of all is a sensible reply and, more generally, to be part of a conversation, but those with more power and connections refuse to engage with you. When you and your ideas come under attack, the tables are turned: If you don’t reply, you are behaving just like a stonewalling establishment. So you might like to consider another question: ‘Is ignoring Zust’s attack compatible with my beliefs about the importance of dialogue?’

COUNTER-ATTACKING

Your critics have made false, malicious, derogatory, humiliating comments. So why not counter-attack? You can call them liars and expose their unsavoury motives, vested interests, and unholy agendas. You can be as rough with them as they were with you. For example: ‘Jamie Zust is the real liar. His statements about the Panzer terrorists are totally wrong. He has been making allegations like this for years, never with any evidence. Actually, Zust is the one with a conflict of interest, due to his affiliation with XYZ Agency.’

Counter-attacking can be emotionally satisfying, but is it a good idea? The disadvantage is that many observers may think less of you. Some of those reading or observing the exchange won’t know the details of the claims and counter-claims. All they have to go on is the style of the engagement. When you counter-attack, what they see is two sides behaving in a similar way: being personal and derogatory. It doesn’t matter that what you say is correct and what the critics say is false and unfair.

You are judged by your style: When your style is nasty and abusive, observers may assume that you yourself are nasty and abusive.

Review the exchange between Smith and Zust above. Who sounds more credible?

It's like two people having a conversation. If both are shouting and swearing, observers won't have much by which to distinguish between the two. The shouting and swearing overshadow what's actually being said. The style becomes the message.

Not everyone will react the same way. Some observers will always be on the side of the critics and some always on your side. But many of those who are less committed or less informed will be swayed by appearances. It's hard to win them over using counter-attack.

Because counter-attacking can be counter-productive, beware of being goaded into making abusive comments. They may be used against you.

There is another whole dimension to counter-attack: you can go beyond words and exercise power, for example, by suing for defamation or by using influence to subject your critics to reprisals, such as getting them fired. This presents a whole new set of questions, but the same principles apply. If you are seen as the attacker and your methods are seen as excessive or unfair, then your actions may backfire: You may lose credibility.⁸

RESPONDING

A third option is to respond without counter-attacking. But how, exactly? In many cases, the most effective response is one that seems sensible, rational, and polite. The idea is to behave the way you would prefer your critics to behave.

If you do this, observers see one side—your critics—behaving aggressively or even rudely while you respond without getting ruffled but just presenting information and reasoned argument. Neutral observers will be more likely to see your critics as bullies and you as a strong, confident target who does not give in and who is not easily provoked.

Let's look more closely at the features of a response. Suppose you write something that is highly technical (from the perspective of the audience) or very complicated or just plain obscure.

Imagine responding to Zust this way: 'The Alpha Foundation provides extender patronage to diversified research groups, giving support for precarious functions. The Settler Fund is one of those groups and provides

just 3.4 per cent of funding for our research. One of the board members of Alpha arranged, under a different aegis, for a charitable contribution to the Panzer Alliance before Panzer was classified as a terrorist organization.’ You would be precise, but the message may be lost in the detail.

Some readers will take what you say as true, but others will not be impressed; they might think you are acting superior or trying to hide something. So, in general, if you have nothing to hide, it’s better to be as clear as possible.

Sometimes you need to go into technical detail, for example, concerning scientific claims about climate change. But you can still communicate to non-specialists by also providing a lay interpretation and take-away message. In other words, you offer technical details for specialists and a translation for non-specialists.

Here’s a possibility: ‘The Alpha Foundation provides only a small amount of support for our research and has never had a formal connection with the Panzer Alliance.’

When you respond to an attack, it’s very tempting to immediately address every one of your critic’s claims. After all, you don’t want to let any of the points go unanswered. But before going down this path, think of others reading the exchange. Are they going to follow all the details? Usually, only a very few will be so familiar with the details that they can remember all the points covered; therefore, often it’s worth including a summary of the key issues.

Suppose you’ve been critiqued in a long online blog, and your response is in the blog’s comments section. Only a few readers will read the critique in full before looking at your response. Most will only skim through the long critique and some may even turn to your response first, especially if it’s brief. What do they want to find out? Often they want to know what the dispute is all about, especially if the long critique raises a lot of different points or is complicated. You can oblige them by providing a summary of the key points, highlighting your critic’s assumptions and explaining the driving forces behind the dispute. So, strangely enough, by explaining what is happening—rather than immediately attempting to rebut the critic’s claims—you open lines of communication and gain credibility. Furthermore, you get to frame the issue in a favourable way.

You might start your response to Zust this way: ‘Our research has addressed a serious social problem—g-expression—using a grounded approach. Others, such as Jamie Zust, prefer a direct-attack approach.’

Before responding to criticism, it is worthwhile to ask a basic question: Are the critics right or wrong? In principle, there are three possibilities: the critics are 100 per cent right, 100 per cent wrong, or somewhere in between. If the critics are completely right, you can make a gracious acknowledgement—but hardly ever are the critics entirely correct. If the critics are completely wrong, then you can challenge everything they say. However, critics are hardly ever entirely wrong on every point—though many responses give this impression.

Typically, critics make some statements that you might accept as accurate factually, though you might think they are misleading, are out of context, or miss the point. The temptation when responding is to ignore the points of agreement and only address the things that are wrong or misleading. But it can be advantageous to accept some criticisms (e.g., ‘Zust is correct that I have received funding from the Alpha Foundation’).

When you admit—occasionally and appropriately—that you’re wrong, you can actually gain credibility. When witnesses in court make admissions against their own interest, judges and juries may think these witnesses are more honest—why else would someone make such an admission? That means the witnesses’ other statements are treated as more credible than they would have been otherwise. No one gets everything right. So when know-it-alls refuse to admit a single mistake, they lose credibility.

No response that you make is going to convince everyone. The way you respond can make a difference on those who have few preconceptions or ties to players in the dispute. Your best strategy is to make your response appeal to them.

Suppose you’ve drafted a response. It can be tempting to send it off immediately. Usually, though, it’s far better to wait, both to calm down emotionally and to obtain comments from others in order to redraft your response. It is extremely valuable to obtain comments from people who don’t know anything about the issue; their queries can prompt you to better explain your position to wider audiences.

When responding on a blog, the matter can seem urgent. Sometimes it is, but in many cases there’s no rush. Your comments may end up being read years later, so it’s worthwhile to wait an extra day, week, or month and make sure your reply is as effective as possible.

If you’ve been personally attacked, you may need to respond directly, but there’s another possibility: Someone else can do it for you. Independent commentators usually have more credibility, especially if they have

standing in the field. If soliciting support, look for someone who is reputable, balanced, knowledgeable, reliable, and a good communicator. It can be difficult to find the ideal person, so you need to weigh the pros and cons of recruiting an independent commentator.

In summary, the keys to an effective response aimed at a non-committed audience are clarity, simplicity, honesty, and insight. If your critic is long-winded, your pithy reply will be more appealing. If your critic is convoluted, your clear explanations are more likely to be accepted. If your critic never admits a weakness, your honesty about both your weaknesses and strengths will make you more credible.

CONCLUSION

When you come under criticism, it can be hard to see the best way to respond. Criticism can be distressing. You may be emotional and want to reply in kind, with equally disparaging comments, and you may feel like replying to every single allegation at length. Or you may feel like ignoring the whole thing and let allegations go unanswered.

To be effective, you need to think about the audience of the original criticisms and the potential audience of your reply. Sometimes it's better not to respond, especially if your position is publicly available and the weaknesses or absurdities of the critic's claims are obvious. But if uncommitted readers might be swayed by an unanswered attack, then consider your opportunities for reply and prepare your response in a way that effectively communicates in content and style.

Most people are too busy or not interested enough to read through long, complex arguments. They will appreciate a brief, informative treatment of the key issues. If you write clearly and fairly enough, your reply might become their preferred entry point into the dispute.

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NOTES

1. I thank Jørgen Johansen and Steve Wright for valuable comments.
2. David Brock, *The Real Anita Hill* (New York: Free Press 1993). Brock later retracted his criticisms; see *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative* (New York: Three Rivers Press 2002). Anita Hill tells her side of the story in *Speaking Truth to Power* (New York: Doubleday 1997).

3. One of the most prominent critiques of non-violent action is Peter Gelderloos, *How Nonviolence Protects the State* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007). See my review 'How Nonviolence Is Misrepresented,' *Gandhi Marg* 30, 2 (July–September 2008): 235–57.
4. For example, Ian Plimer, *Heaven and Earth. Global Warming: The Missing Science* (Ballan, Victoria, Australia: Connor Court Publishing 2009)
5. Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumours: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done* (London: Allen Lane 2009)
6. *Ibid.*, *On Rumours*, 53
7. In the debate over fluoridation of public water supplies, some proponents have argued that debates should be avoided because they give more credibility to opponents. See Brian Martin, *Scientific Knowledge in Controversy: The Social Dynamics of the Fluoridation Debate* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 60–2.
8. Truda Gray and Brian Martin, 'Defamation and the Art of Backfire,' *Deakin Law Review* 11, 2 (2006): 115–36; Brian Martin and Truda Gray, 'How to Make Defamation Threats and Actions Backfire,' *Australian Journalism Review* 27, 1 (July 2005): 157–66