

Advice for the Dissident Scholar

By Brian Martin

Political forces make light of the academy's concerns about academic freedom as they seek to abolish tenure. Yet there is a substantial body of evidence to show that college faculty and anyone else who threatens a powerful individual or group is potentially a target of suppression and retribution.

The classic case of suppression of dissent involves retribution against a whistleblower—someone who speaks out in the public interest, for example a professor who accuses a senior colleague of scientific fraud or points out the danger of a chemical produced by one's employer.¹ But there are other victims of suppression—some in the academic community—who aren't whistleblowers.

In 1979, when I first began investigating and writing about suppression of intellectual dissent, I was an applied mathematician interested in environmental issues. I discovered a pattern of suppres-

sion of environmental scholars. The more I looked into the issue, the more cases showed up. Then, after I published articles about suppression, even more cases were brought to my attention.

Initially, I hadn't even thought of suppression as a problem in science and academia. Now I realize that it is pervasive. Each case has its own peculiarities, but there are some regularly recurring features of suppression cases.²

First, someone does something—research, teaching, or public comment—that threatens a powerful interest group. Second, there is a subsequent attack on the person. This might be censorship, disciplinary proceedings, slander, transfer, dismissal, or blacklisting.

A few cases are dramatic. Melvin Reuber, who had done research on pesticides and cancer, was suddenly given a severe reprimand by his boss. The bulk of this reprimand was published in a chemical industry trade magazine

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and circulated around the world.³

Margot O'Toole, who persistently raised questions about the work of her superiors, suffered enormous damage to her scientific career.⁴

But most cases are more subtle. Job applications don't lead to jobs; publications are rejected; promotion is denied; grant applications are unsuccessful.

In most cases, it is impossible to know the real reason. The decision might be fair, it might be suppression, or it might just be bad luck. But there are two simple techniques to help decide whether suppression might have occurred.

The first is the double-standard test. Have other scholars, with the same credentials, been treated the same way? For example, a researcher might be denied promotion for lack of publications. Were colleagues with the same publication record—but who never refused to add their boss's name to their papers—also denied promotion? Was the professor whose position was declared redundant the one who spoke to the media, criticizing an influential company in the town?

The second technique is to look for patterns of suppression. For example, attacks on expert critics of pesticides, nuclear power, and fluoridation are numerous. In each case there is a threat to powerful interests: the pesticide industry;

government and the nuclear industry; the dental profession, in the case of fluoridation.⁵

There is never final proof that suppression has occurred. But using the double-standard test and establishing a pattern of suppression can provide strong circumstantial evidence.

Many scholars have an abiding faith in the power of truth. They believe that if people really knew what was going on—about the corruption, the danger to the public, or the attacks on free speech—they would be supportive. They also believe that somewhere there are powerful people who will respond to the truth and ensure that justice is done.

My first piece of advice for dissident scholars is not to rely on truth. It's useful but not enough. Certainly, you cannot rely on truth to sway the powerful.

Scholars believe that academia is engaged in seeking and disseminating knowledge and that the "marketplace of ideas" will lead to the triumph of truth. This isn't a good model.

It's far more useful to treat academia as a system of power, in which knowledge plays an important role. Government and industry fund research because they expect results to be useful, either in a practical or symbolic way.

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Remember Lord Acton's adage, "Power tends to corrupt." Those who have power in academia—deans, grant administrators, research directors, editors—will often use it to advance their own ends and protect themselves from perceived threats.

Most whistleblowers act out of a belief in the power of truth. They speak out, believing that the problems they point out will be rectified once people know about them. Occasionally this happens. But, all too often, it is the whistleblower who is seen as the "problem" and "rectified."

This does not mean there is a conscious conspiracy of evil schemers who set out to destroy dissidents. Just the opposite. Often, those who attack dissent sincerely believe they are doing the right thing. They see dissenters as incompetent or dangerous because the dissenters question a valid procedure or threaten to undermine an important enterprise.

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My second piece of advice for dissident scholars is that they should understand their goals.

This may seem unnecessary. Surely the goal is self-evident:

Expose and correct the injustice or abuse of power!

But seldom is it clear-cut what this means in practice. Does this mean allowing free speech? Penalizing those who suppress dissent? Exposing the wrong-doing? Getting compensation?

Is informing the public about a dangerous situation the only goal? What about keeping one's job, or maintaining future career options? Is the aim to expose and penalize the guilty ones or to have them admit that they were wrong? What sacrifices is one willing to make to achieve these goals? What about the effects on one's personal life?

Once goals have been spelled out, it is time to develop a strategy.

A workable strategy must take political realities into account. The strategy should account for who are likely to be supporters, the resources at the disposal of opponents, the cultural climate, one's skills in this sort of enterprise, and so forth. In formulating a strategy, it is valuable to have a gut-level understanding of how academia operates as a system of power and knowledge.

Two contrasting Australian examples illustrate the value of understanding science and academia as systems of power and knowledge and having well-thought-out goals.

First is the case of two medical

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researchers who worked for the Australian doctor who discovered that the drug thalidomide causes birth defects. These researchers found out that the doctor had falsified some of his data in a published paper. When they confronted him, they were dismissed and their careers were almost destroyed.

The researchers had the naive belief that truth would lead to justice. They had no strategy that took account of the exercise of power. The board of the institution the doctor had set up for his medical research backed him. He had the prestige and power. It was only years later, after journalists took up the story, that the fraud was exposed.⁶

The second example involves an archeologist at the University of Western Australia who was denied tenure in 1993. He knew that this was coming. After arriving at the university in 1989, he soon discovered a range of improper behaviors in the archeology department, including sexual impositions placed on students.

As soon as the archeologist began expressing concern about these problems, he came under attack. He was moved to another department, accused of plagiarism and sexual harassment, had his teaching taken away, and was eventually moved out of the department.

But the whistle-blower mounted an effective campaign with the

goal of gaining tenure or, if that was unsuccessful, exposing the university administration. He produced a mammoth body of material documenting his case for tenure. The tenure committee based its case for rejection on his research record. But this dissident scholar mobilized support nationally and internationally, as well as documenting his case.

Thirty prominent figures in the field wrote to the university testifying to his outstanding research record and abilities. He and his supporters also developed an effective media campaign and won the support of some politicians. The Western Australian parliament set up a major inquiry into the whole affair.

The archeologist's campaign took into account the powerful forces ranged against him. (Tragically, he died unexpectedly in 1996 at the age of 49, before the parliamentary inquiry was completed.)⁷ The report, when it did come out in December 1997, strongly criticized many of the university's actions.

There's no method that can guarantee success. Sometimes a simple "speak-truth-to-power" approach will work, and sometimes the most sophisticated campaign will fail. I believe that an approach based on clear goals and a strategy based on an understanding of academia as a power-knowl-

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edge system will improve the chances of success. With this foundation, let's look at some elements of a strategy.

It is crucial to document the case if there is any chance of repercussions. Evidence of corruption, discrimination, or public hazard must be watertight. This means saving copies of correspondence, receipts, lab notes, whatever is important. It is also wise to take notes on conversations and get signed statements from colleagues. Documents should be kept in a safe place.

Documents are valuable, but you also need an account of the case that is accessible and understandable to people who aren't familiar with the situation. I have several suppression cases in my files for which I have literally hundreds of pages of documents. Very few people are going to wade through or make sense of such a pile of paper.

What is needed is a convenient summary. It could be a one-page summary or a 5,000-word article. But, the summary, whatever its length, should provide back-up material. If possible, it should be written by someone sympathetic to the dissident, rather than the dissident herself, who might be too close to the situation to write a convincing account.

In my opinion, mobilizing support is usually the most important technique for opposing suppression. This is also the area where understanding academia as a power-knowledge system is most crucial. It is vital to know who are likely to be supporters, neutrals, and opponents, and then to encourage supporters to take action, neutrals to become sympathetic, and discourage opponents from action or reduce their hostility.

Other dissidents can provide moral support and invaluable insights into the dynamics of suppression. Whistleblower support organizations also can be helpful.

People from outside the organization sometimes can be a great help. This might include personal friends, colleagues at other institutions, "members of the public," and even people from other countries.

A supportive union is a tremendous asset and can often make the difference between success and failure. But a union or a professional association may not always be helpful. Many dissidents report that unions and professional associations are unhelpful or even favor the other side.

This can happen when conflicts pit one union member against another or because of links between union officials and the group attacking the dissident. Consequently, it is wise to foster union

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activism on issues of dissent while not assuming there will be support on any individual case.

Social movement groups, such as social justice or environmental groups, sometimes are helpful. This depends a lot on the issue. If you've been speaking out against destructive forestry practices, then environmental groups are likely to be supportive. But there are no guarantees. Social movement elites have also been known to suppress insiders or sympathizers who are seen as critical of the movement or its methods.

How can allies of a dissident help? A first and absolutely vital way is by listening and providing advice and moral support. An attack is often psychologically devastating. It can destroy people's faith in the organization or cause to which they have committed years of work—or even destroy faith in the possibility of justice.

It is also a blow when colleagues and friends desert a dissident at a crucial moment. To have even one friend or family member willing to stand by through thick and thin is to have a prize asset.

A second important way supporters can help is by raising the issues—exposing the corruption or warning the public of dangers. The aim of suppression is to stop open discussion of the issues. Supporters undermine this aim by continuing

to raise the alarm.

Suppression works best when it is hidden. If the dissident is willing, the suppression itself should be exposed. Out in the open, suppression usually discredits the suppressors.

For many scholars, publicity is unsought and even undesired. A polite report on research for promotional purposes is okay, but anything more personal or political can be frightening. The immediate instinct of many of those who are attacked is to go into hiding, telling almost no one about what happened and hoping everything will return to normal.

This response makes it very difficult to court publicity. But for most cases, publicity is the single most effective means to mount a challenge.

Often it is good to start small, by asking, for example, some colleagues to write letters of inquiry or concern to relevant officials (often the suppressors or their superiors). This lets the officials know that other people are aware of what is going on.

The campaign can be expanded by getting concerned individuals from all over to write letters. To aid this process, it is useful to compile a small packet of material, perhaps a summary of the case plus a few supporting articles or documents.

The next level of escalation is to make information and messages of support available to a wider audience.

This material should be accurate. Even minor errors or exaggerations will be seized upon by opponents.

This may not sound like doing a great deal—it's a pretty quiet process—but it can be productive. Amnesty International's most important techniques are scrupulously accurate research and letter writing. Using this method, activists have succeeded in freeing some political prisoners held by ruthless regimes. The same technique can work for dissident scholars.

The next level of escalation is to make information and messages of support available to a wider audience. Letters to newspapers and journals can be effective here.

Many scholars are frightened of the media, claiming that they get the facts wrong. But the reason the media seem dangerous is that no individual can control the coverage. It helps to look at the media as part of the wider social systems of power and knowledge.

Most journalists are competent and well-intentioned, and some have great skills. But they work under extreme pressure. Scholars can spend months researching and writing an article, have their work checked by colleagues and referees, and be able to correct errors at the proof stage. Journalists don't have

this luxury. They often have to write several articles in a single day, sometimes on completely different topics, knowing that some may not be published. Usually someone else writes the headlines to their stories.

Therefore, journalists cannot be expected to read through piles of documents and research a case the way scholars would. Instead, they need a succinct treatment of the key issues. They will then talk to the dissident or supporters and to people on the other side.

It is useful to remember that anything one says may end up in print. Journalists normally will report "both sides" of the issue. That gives the story greater credibility, even if it seems unfair to the dissident. If everything in a story is exactly the way one side likes it, then it probably seems unbalanced to many readers.

Sure, there may be inaccuracies, but unless these are really serious, they're not worth worrying about. So what if a name is misspelled or the story refers incorrectly to dismissal rather than denial of tenure? Attention should be focused on stating the central issues over and over again. Minor details are of interest to the dissident but a distraction for others.

When a researcher at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science in Adelaide, South Australia,

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was dismissed in 1980, the official reasons turned out to be spurious. Many thought the real motivation was the researcher's outspokenness on chemical hazards and other environmental issues. A colleague and I each wrote quite a number of letters and articles for a wide range of newspapers and journals.

The responses were revealing. Newspapers were much more likely to publish our submissions than the scientific journals we wrote to. Further, the newspaper stories were at least as accurate as any that did appear in the scientific journals.⁸

There's a good reason for this. Suppression usually involves powerful figures attacking weaker ones. Prominent journals often have links with powerful scholars and are reluctant to take up the cause of challengers. The mass media, on the other hand, have fewer ties to elite scholars. Editors know that readers like human interest and tales of corruption. Suppression cases are newsworthy.

Supporters can also help by offering resolutions at academic conferences. They can also organize rallies or even a strike.

When a faculty member was threatened with dismissal from the University of Adelaide for writing a letter about pesticides to the local newspaper, students supported him by occupying administration offices.

These actions have value main-

ly for their symbolic effect. They demonstrate the intense concern felt by some individuals and alert wider audiences to the issues. In a sense, they are a form of publicity.

Publicity—in the widest sense, not just media coverage—is highly effective in mobilizing the support that is central to the struggle against suppression. I have seen this work in practice, but there are also theoretical reasons why it should work.

Most suppression is carried out in large bureaucratic enterprises, such as government departments, companies, and universities. In these bureaucracies only a narrow range of viewpoints is allowed.⁹

Without a base of support, individual whistleblowers are isolated and vulnerable to attack, no matter what the justice of their claims.

Bureaucracies work by controlling information. They can handle challenges that go through the "proper channels." Publicity undermines their power over information and reaches a constituency they cannot control.

Dissidents are often tempted to use official procedures. They make a formal complaint, file a grievance, use appeal procedures, approach an ombudsperson, or file a lawsuit. Sometimes these procedures are effective. But my advice is not to rely on them. They often

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give only the appearance of dealing with the problem without achieving anything for the dissident.

Official channels are designed by, and usually serve the purposes of, powerful organizations. Typically, they keep public discussion to a minimum. They deal with technicalities rather than the underlying issues. They take a lot of time, allowing abuses to continue. They are largely under the control of bodies with more links to suppressors than to dissenters.

My skepticism of official channels is not based on some nasty personal experience, but rather on observing quite a number of cases. William De Maria of the University of Queensland carried out a major study of whistleblowers. He catalogued their experiences with numerous official channels, such as the Ombudsman and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. In less than one out of ten cases was there a positive response.¹⁰

In many cases, official channels were not just useless but actually harmful to the whistleblower. Jean Lennane, former president of Whistleblowers Australia, reached a similar conclusion from her own investigations. She found only two things reliably helped: media coverage and contact with other whistleblowers.

What about whistleblower legislation? It seems to be a solution, but actually it is usually flawed from its conception. In many cases, legislation ostensibly designed to protect whistleblowers requires them to report abuses within the organization first.

This is a prescription for making sure the abuses are not publicized. Indeed, some critics argue that whistleblower legislation gives only the appearance of providing redress against abuses while ensuring that nothing changes.¹¹

Furthermore, only a small fraction of suppression cases qualify under whistleblower legislation. For example, this legislation provides no means to challenge the systematic rejection of unorthodox viewpoints by academic journals.

To be sure, there are some cases where dissidents are vindicated through official channels. But in many cases this is because of efforts by supporters or the possibility of publicity.

The victim in one case went to the Industrial Court after his dismissal from the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science. After the case had been heard at some length, the parties to the dispute arranged a face-saving compromise. They agreed to claim that he had been retrenched rather than dismissed, thus entitling him to a considerable payout. But part of

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the pressure to make this arrangement came from the massive campaign waged to publicize his case.

Going through official channels is, for most dissidents, entering "enemy territory." Even the strongest cases can fail. I recommend official channels only if a case is rock-solid, or if pressure is being applied in other ways, and preferably only when both conditions are met.

Faith in official channels dies hard. When one official body proves useless or joins in the suppression, many dissidents seek out another and then another. Official channels should be understood not as neutral tools of justice, but as part of a wide, though often uncoordinated, power structure.

Just as academia is a system of power-knowledge, so are bureaucracies, federal agencies, and the courts. Sometimes they might be helpful to dissidents, but it is important to be wary.

Most suppression cases last far longer than anyone could imagine at the beginning. Some whistleblowers are still fighting to clear their names 10 or even 20 years after the original attack. Dissidents need to be aware of the possibility of such a long-term commitment.

They should ask themselves whether it is worth spending years of their lives fighting for the cause and, if so, what they hope to

achieve. The struggle may be long. It can often be nasty. Dissidents should be prepared for unscrupulous behavior by the other side.

In the University of Adelaide case, the university claimed the victim had allowed his wife, who worked in the same department, to work too many hours. In court, the university produced an addendum at the bottom of a carbon copy of a contract that showed the extra hours. Luckily, she had the original—and it had no addendum!

Forged documents are one thing. Destruction or hiding of documents is more common. Then there are payoffs—money, promotions—for keeping quiet or joining in a conspiracy.

If there is the slightest suspicion that underhanded techniques may be used, it is wise to keep multiple copies of documents, including copies deposited with a lawyer, journalist, or friend who is separate from the case. If the stakes are very high, it may be wise to take personal precautions.

In many countries, of course, suppression of ideas is accompanied by physical repression. Scientists, academics, and intellectuals often have been targets for imprisonment, torture, and murder, for example in Mexico, Kenya, and Cambodia.

I don't mean to be gloomy about

the possibilities of dissent. Personally, I believe that dissent is vital to building a free and democratic society. Standing up for justice is good, but it's much better if it's effective.

There are plenty of dissenters who decide to acquiesce after they've been attacked. Thereafter, they conform to what is required. Sometimes they even join in attacks on other dissidents. Some prominent dissidents have spent years trying to become acceptable to the establishment.¹²

Obviously, suppression can be effective in stifling dissent. Even more important is the role of suppression in signaling to others—those who haven't expressed any dissent—the dangers of stepping out of line.

Effective dissenters neither acquiesce nor make futile gestures. Instead, they carefully assess the situation to figure out a strategy that will achieve both their own

goals and those of the causes they support.

Sometimes this means making an open challenge—with every prospect of being attacked. Other times, it means keeping a low profile and working to mobilize support. One lesson from the failures of so many whistleblowers is the need to be aware of the power of likely opponents and to be prepared for what may be in store.

What I say here needs to be evaluated in light of circumstances. While there are regular patterns in suppression cases, each one has its own idiosyncratic features.

Overt suppression is a sign that normal processes of social control have not worked. Suppression reveals the dynamics of power in society in a way not possible when conformity prevails. Through their struggles, dissidents and their supporters always learn a lot about how society operates. ■

Endnotes

¹ Myron Peretz Glazer and Penina Migdal Glazer, *The Whistleblowers: Exposing Corruption in Government and Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Marcia P. Miceli and Janet P. Near, *Blowing the Whistle: The Organizational and Legal Implications for Companies and Employees* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992). For practical purposes, the single most useful source is Julie Stewart, Thomas Devine, and Dina Rasor, *Courage without Martyrdom: A Survival Guide for Whistleblowers* (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Project, 1989). See also Brian Martin, ed., *Confronting the Experts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

² Brian Martin, *Suppression Stories* (Wol-

longong: Fund for Intellectual Dissent, 1997); <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/>.

³ Keith Schneider, "Hard Times: Government Scientists Fall Victim to the Administration's Policy to Silence Debate," *Amicus Journal* (fall 1982), 22-31.

⁴ Serge Lang, "Questions of Scientific Responsibility: The Baltimore Case," *Ethics & Behavior* 3, no. 1 (1993): 3-72; Judy Sarasohn, *Science on Trial: The Whistle-Blower, the Accused, and the Nobel Laureate* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

⁵ Brian Martin, "Critics of Pesticides: Whistleblowing or Suppression of Dissent?" *Philosophy and Social Action* 22, no. 3 (July-September 1996): 33-55; Brian Martin, "Nuclear Suppression," *Science and Public Pol-*

icy 13, no. 6 (December 1986): 312-320; Brian Martin, *Scientific Knowledge in Controversy: The Social Dynamics of the Fluoridation Debate* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

⁶ Bill Nicol McBride: *Behind the Myth*. Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1989.

⁷ For comprehensive documentation, see <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~hjarvis/rindos.html>.

⁸ Brian Martin and Clyde Manwell, "Publicizing Suppression," in Brian Martin, C.M. Ann Baker, Clyde Manwell, and Cedric Pugh, eds., *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1986), 253-256.

⁹ Deena Weinstein, *Bureaucratic Opposition: Challenging Abuses at the Workplace* (New York: Pergamon, 1979).

¹⁰ William De Maria and Cyrelle Jan, "Behold the Shut-eyed Sentry! Whistleblower Perspectives on Government Failure to Correct Wrongdoing," *Crime, Law & Social Change* 24 (1996): 151-166.

¹¹ Tom Devine and Donald G. Aplin, "Whistleblower Protection—The Gap Between the Law and Reality," *Howard Law Journal* 31 (1988): 223-239.

¹² Mary O. Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865-1905* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975).

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