

Gorski versus a Wollongong PhD thesis

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In early 2016, David Gorski made several blog posts about the graduation of Judy Wilyman from the University of Wollongong and my writings about the attack on her thesis. Analysis of the content and methods of his posts reveals serious shortcomings in Gorski's claims. More fundamentally, they display an approach quite different from that usual in social sciences.

Introduction

Judy Wilyman received her PhD from the University of Wollongong in December 2015. Her thesis was posted on the university's website on 11 January 2016, and shortly after there commenced a furious attack on the thesis, on Judy, on me as her principal supervisor and on the University of Wollongong. The attack was launched with an article on the front page of the national newspaper *The Australian*, written by journalist Kylar Loussikian and published on 13 January.¹ This was followed by further articles in *The Australian*, numerous blog posts, a petition asking for disciplinary action to be taken against the university,² and extensive hostile comments on Facebook and Twitter, among other things.

David Gorski was one of those who offered his opinions on the thesis, posting under the name Orac on his blog "Respectful insolence."³ Gorski is a prolific commentator on a number of issues, and has both supporters and critics. My aim here is to look at Gorski's posts relating to Judy's thesis, identify the techniques he uses

¹ Kylar Loussikian, "Uni accepts thesis on vaccine 'conspiracy'," *The Australian*, 13 January 2016, pp. 1, 4.

² Alex Fein, "Stop the University of Wollongong's spread of disease and death via anti-vaccination PhD," Change.org petition. <https://www.change.org/p/simon-birmingham-stop-the-university-of-wollongong-s-spread-of-disease-and-death-via-anti-vaccination-phd>.

³ <http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/>

and infer the assumptions underlying his commentary. In the following sections, I begin by looking at four posts on Gorski's blog, highlighting several of their distinctive features. Then I point to characteristic differences between our approaches to the issues, in particular differences in the ways each of us undertakes social analysis.

Post #1, 13 January 2016

Gorski's first blog post is titled "The University of Wollongong issues a PhD in antivaccine pseudoscience."⁴ Its primary aim seems to be to discredit Judy's thesis. But how can he do this? What authority does he have to pass judgement on her thesis? How can he make an informed judgement having had only a day or so to read it?

Gorski apparently relied heavily on Loussikian's article in *The Australian*. As I have documented elsewhere,⁵ Loussikian misrepresented the content of the thesis by claiming it argued a conspiracy theory and by not presenting the key evidence and arguments in the thesis. Gorski likewise fails to address the arguments in the thesis, suggesting he relied on Loussikian for his information.

Loussikian, as well as misrepresenting Judy's thesis, used the technique of guilt by association to discredit me. Loussikian mentioned one of my other PhD students, Michael Primero, who studied with me in the 1990s but discontinued his candidature. Gorski also refers to Michael Primero, like Loussikian failing to mention the other 30 PhD students for whom I have been principal supervisor. Gorski, referring to me, says "He's so enamored of quackery that another of his students was Michael Primero, associated with Medical Veritas, a self-described journal of 'truth in health science' that alleged the Rockefeller Foundation had declared a war on consciousness through the imposition of musical tuning standards." Gorski, like Loussikian, uses guilt by association.⁶

Gorski assumes the authority to judge a social science PhD. On what grounds? He does not say. He presents no evidence that he has ever been an examiner for a

⁴ <http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2016/01/13/the-university-of-wollongong-issues-a-phd-in-antivaccine-pseudoscience/>

⁵ Brian Martin, "News with a negative frame: a vaccination case study," <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/16Loussikian.html>

⁶ For details on Loussikian's statements about Michael Primero, see "News with a negative frame."

social science PhD, nor that he understands what is involved in a thesis dealing with vaccination policy.

Gorski also makes judgements about me and the University of Wollongong without having any knowledge about the processes we used to ensure the quality of the thesis. To begin, he incorrectly assumes that Australian universities use the same procedures as in the US, saying Judy “really, really needed to have some very uncomfortable questions asked by her thesis committee and at her thesis seminar and defense, questions that apparently were not asked.” In Australia, there are no thesis seminars and defences. Following comments on his blog, Gorski added a correction: “I’m informed in the comments that Australian universities don’t do the traditional public thesis defense done in the US and Europe, but rather the thesis has to be read by two experts external to the University and the supervisor gets to make the call. Ugh.” Taking the comment⁷ at face value, he gets this wrong too: “the supervisor gets to make the call” is misleading at best because, after a thesis is submitted, the supervisor is not involved in making decisions about it.

In condemning Judy’s thesis, me and the university, Gorski deploys a range of colourful abusive language. For example, he calls Judy “a prominent antivaccine loon” and “a woefully clueless antiscience PhD student.” He states “In light of Wilyman’s thesis being accepted, the reassurances of the University of Wollongong that Wilyman would be held to rigorous standards have been revealed for the humongous pile of fetid dingo’s kidneys that they were.”

In summary, Gorski in his 13 January post:

- passed summary judgement on a thesis within a day
- relied on a newspaper article without checking many of the claims made in it
- assumed the authority to judge a thesis in a field in which he had not demonstrated any competence
- made claims about university procedures about which he had inadequate knowledge
- used abusive language.

⁷ Chris Preston, <http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2016/01/13/the-university-of-wollongong-issues-a-phd-in-antivaccine-pseudoscience/>, comment #63, 13 January 2016

Post #2, 14 January 2016

A day after his first blog post, Gorski returned to the attack with another, titled “Brian Martin and Judy Wilyman: Promoting antivaccine pseudoscience as ‘dissent’.”⁸ He begins with the motivation for his concern, that “Wilyman is an antivaccine loon and the University of Wollongong saw fit to bestow a PhD on her for a thesis riddled with antivaccine tropes and pseudoscience.” He then turns his attention to me as Judy’s supervisor.

Gorski continues to write under the misapprehension that Australian PhD processes are like those in the US, for example saying incorrectly that “there’s a thesis committee to whom PhD candidates periodically present their work.” In Australia, most commonly there is no committee but instead a principal supervisor and a second supervisor, called an associate supervisor. A crucial difference is that the thesis is judged not by a thesis committee but by independent examiners.⁹

In this post, Gorski focuses on my document “Judy Wilyman, PhD.”¹⁰ In it, I summarised four main critical points about Australian vaccination policy that Judy makes in her thesis. Gorski summarily dismisses them. For example, I wrote that the first critical point was that “deaths from infectious diseases had dramatically declined in Australia before the mass introduction of most vaccines, suggesting that vaccination is not the only factor in controlling these diseases.” Gorski writes of this: “Antivaccine trope: Vaccines didn’t save us, one of the more intellectually dishonest of some very intellectually dishonest antivaccine tropes.”

On the positive side, Gorski took the trouble to read my document “Judy Wilyman, PhD” and actually address some of its content. In particular, he actually spelled out, via my summary, key points in Judy’s thesis. This was far more than Loussikian did in his article in *The Australian* or indeed in several subsequent articles, despite being alerted to my document before his first story. It is also more than most

⁸ <http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2016/01/14/brian-martin-and-judy-wilyman-promoting-antivaccine-pseudoscience-as-dissent/>

⁹ The Australian system for evaluating theses, modelled on the British system, is analogous to the system of peer review with external referees, as widely used by scholarly journals and university book publishers. The US system is closer to the procedure used by some journals in which an editorial team or collective judges submissions, without external refereeing.

¹⁰ “Judy Wilyman, PhD: how to understand attacks on a research student,” 11 January 2016, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/16jw.html>

other commentators on Judy's thesis, who accepted Loussikian's misleading characterisation without question.

On the negative side, in respect to the content of Judy's thesis, Gorski rejects her arguments based on a superficial assessment. He relies on my brief summary of her critical points apparently without consulting the treatment in her thesis. He then dismisses her argument by calling it an "antivaccine trope." Just because critics of vaccines make a particular argument does not make it wrong: to rebut Judy's arguments requires examining them, not just labelling them.¹¹

After dismissing Judy's arguments based on a superficial commentary based on my one-paragraph summary, Gorski then turns to me, saying "Given Martin's defense of Andrew Wakefield and his characterization of criticism of him as 'suppression of vaccination dissent' one has to wonder how much Martin buys into antivaccine pseudoscience. Quite a lot, I suspect." He gives a link to my article "On the suppression of vaccination dissent"¹² but seems not to have read it in sufficient detail to understand my argument about Wakefield. I did not argue that Wakefield had been suppressed, but made a more subtle point, summarised thus: "Wakefield may have been suppressed, or he may have been treated fairly in light of his transgressions, but it is difficult to say for sure given that none of his orthodox peers have had their work investigated to the same level."

Gorski states "All Martin sees when it comes to antivaccine activists is 'dissent'," claiming that I don't distinguish between "dissent based on facts, science, and logic and dissent based on pseudoscience and misinformation," that "Wilyman's 'dissent'" is based on the latter, and that this is "postmodernism at its worst. There are no 'narratives' that are closer to the truth than others." Setting aside that this is a misrepresentation or misunderstanding of postmodernism, Gorski here begs what needs to be proved. He asserts that Judy's thesis is "pseudoscience" by misrepresenting and rejecting her ideas, not careful analysis. It is strange for Gorski to accuse me of "postmodernism at its worst" given that my work on suppression is seen by many in my field as not being sufficiently constructivist.

¹¹ Gorski's use of the word "trope" is curious. The key here may be the label "antivaccine" that Gorski uses, without defining it, as a term of condemnation. He does not refer to his own arguments as "provaccine tropes."

¹² *Science & Engineering Ethics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2015, pp. 143–157, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/15see.html>

Gorski next turns to the following text of mine:

When people criticise a research student's work, it is worth checking for tell-tale signs indicating when these are not genuine concerns about quality and probity but instead part of a campaign to denigrate viewpoints they oppose.

1. They attack the person, not just their work.
2. They concentrate on alleged flaws in the work, focusing on small details and ignoring the central points.
3. They make no comparisons with other students or theses or with standard practice, but rather make criticisms in isolation or according to their own assumed standards.
4. They assume that findings contrary to what they believe is correct must be wrong or dangerous or both.

The attacks on Judy's research exhibit every one of these signs. Her opponents attack her as a person, repeatedly express outrage over certain statements she has made while ignoring the central themes in her work, make no reference to academic freedom or standard practice in university procedures, and simply assume that she must be wrong.¹³

I posted this text on the day that Judy's thesis was made available on the university's website and her graduation announced. It accurately characterised features of the attacks on Judy's thesis. Gorski, though, begs to differ.

He first claims that "This is such incredible nonsense, not to mention rank hypocrisy," saying that vaccine critics are guilty of attacking the person, including Gorski himself. Perhaps so, but that hardly undermines my point, which is about critics of a student's work. A commentator on Gorski's blog named sadmar¹⁴ pointed out that Gorski had himself called Judy an "antivaccine loon" — an obvious example of attacking the person, not just their work — to which he replied "As for calling Judy Wilyman an 'antivaccine loon', well, that is an accurate description of what she is."¹⁵

Regarding my second point, he says "It *is* the central points of Wilyman's thesis that are being criticized ...". Gorski makes a relevant comment here because, unlike nearly all other commentators, he actually responded to some of the ideas in the thesis, though seemingly based largely on my one-paragraph summary. However, his understanding of Judy's thesis is quite limited. For example, he nowhere mentions that her main case study is the HPV vaccine.

¹³ "Judy Wilyman, PhD."

¹⁴ <http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2016/01/14/brian-martin-and-judy-wilyman-promoting-antivaccine-pseudoscience-as-dissent/>, comment #104, 15 January 2016

¹⁵ Ibid., comment #105, 15 January 2016

Gorski ignores my third point and on the fourth point asserts “attacks on vaccination like those made by Wilyman ... *are* wrong and dangerous.” Because he has not undertaken a sufficiently detailed analysis of Judy’s thesis to show that her work is wrong, my fourth point describes his position exactly: he has *assumed* her findings are wrong and dangerous.

Post #3, 20 January 2016

A week after his first post about Judy’s thesis and my research on dissent in science, Gorski posted a third comment, titled “Brian Martin again: Criticizing Judy Wilyman’s antivaccine thesis is suppression of dissent.”¹⁶

After discussing his connections with Australians in the Skeptics movement, he turns to an article of mine published in *The Australian*¹⁷: “His statement, couched in defending ‘dissent’ and invoking academic freedom (without, it should be noted, any seeming concern for academic rigor) was every bit as much of a stinking, slimy piece of BS as his student’s thesis was.” This is a cue for further criticisms of Judy’s thesis, after which he returns to the “crank named Martin” saying that it is not censorship to refuse to publish substandard articles or retract flawed articles, and that “That’s just peer review, and peer review is not the same thing as censorship.” What Gorski misses here is that the process through which Judy’s thesis was passed *is* peer review. What he is arguing for is in effect rejection of peer review and instead dismissal of the thesis on the basis of a firestorm of denunciation by people who oppose Judy’s views.

In my article in *The Australian*, I summarised my critique of SAVN, in a paragraph that Gorski quotes:

The most prominent vaccine-critical group in Australia was the AVN, the Australian Vaccination-skeptics Network. In 2010, an opponent group, SAVN, Stop the Australian (Anti) Vaccination Network, set itself the task of destroying the AVN, using a variety of techniques, including unsupported claims, verbal abuse and numerous complaints to official bodies.

¹⁶ <http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2016/01/20/brian-martin-again-criticizing-judy-wilymans-antivaccine-thesis-is-suppression-of-dissent/>

¹⁷ Brian Martin, “Hysterical reaction to vaccination study an attack on academic freedom,” *The Australian*, 20 January 2016, p. 29, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/16australian.html>

Gorski criticises me on the basis of this summary, not mentioning any of the articles I have published that provide backing for my statements, including articles in refereed journals.¹⁸ Gorski says, “This is a highly dishonest and biased accounting of the situation. First of all, knowing a few of the members of SAVN, I know that the SAVN does not traffick in unsupported claims.” If Gorski had read my article “Debating vaccination,”¹⁹ he could have read my analysis of SAVN’s claim that the AVN believes in a global conspiracy to implant mind control chips, a claim that I labelled “unsupported” though that is a mild description of an outlandish attribution of belief asserted with only the flimsiest pretext of a justification. Gorski then says “Freedom of speech does not equal freedom from criticism or freedom from consequences due to exercising freedom of speech. Moreover, if you want verbal nastiness, Meryl Dorey is your woman, as is apparently Judy Wilyman.” However, he provides no quotation of any of their alleged verbal nastiness.

In my article in *The Australian*, I repeated the tell-tale signs that criticism of a thesis is part of an attack. One of them was “First, they attack the person, not just their work.” Gorski follows this quote with this comment: “Writes the man who’s just spent most of his article attacking SAVN without addressing any of its specific criticisms.” Gorski fails to note that in writing a newspaper article, there is no space for full documentation and that I had addressed SAVN’s criticisms at some length in my published articles.

Gorski quotes another sentence from my article in *The Australian*:

Opponents, following SAVN’s line that open criticism of vaccination policy should be censored, have condemned the thesis, questioned my supervision and the expertise of the thesis examiners, and condemned the university for allowing the thesis to proceed.

Gorski then says “I don’t know about anyone else, but *this* critic hadn’t even seen the SAVN’s response when first wrote about the travesty that is Wilyman’s thesis.” However, when I wrote about opponents following SAVN’s line, I meant it in the

¹⁸ See my articles in *Science and Public Policy*, *Science and Engineering Ethics*, *Social Medicine* and *First Monday*: [http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/controversy.html - vaccination](http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/controversy.html-vaccination)

¹⁹ Brian Martin, “Debating vaccination: understanding the attack on the Australian Vaccination Network,” *Living Wisdom*, Issue 8, February 2011, pp. 14–40, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/11LivingWisdom.html>

sense of adopting the same approach. That is what Loussikian did in practice, whatever his contacts with SAVNers might have been. Gorski may not have seen SAVN's response but he certainly had seen Loussikian's article, and he followed its framing of the issues as well as reproducing some of Loussikian's claims without checking their accuracy.

Gorski returns to his statement that "Freedom of speech does not equal freedom from criticism." I never claimed that; instead, I presented tell-tale signs that criticisms were part of an attack.

Post #4, 1 February 2016

After I posted a commentary about the attacks on Judy's thesis,²⁰ Gorski posted a response titled "From deep in the heart of the 'organized campaign' against Judy Wilyman's antivaccine PhD thesis."²¹ As he says, his response covers much of the same ground as his previous posts. So I will note just one point. Gorski states "If Martin wants to really convince people that Wilyman's thesis was critiqued by real experts, he has but to release their names. He does not, and that tells me all I need to know about his claim. It is puffery, nothing more." The university promises confidentiality to thesis examiners, so for me to release their names would be a violation of university procedures as well as a breach of trust with the examiners. The vaccination researchers who commented on Judy's thesis draft before submission requested anonymity, so again it would be a breach of trust to reveal their names. Gorski is asking me to violate confidentiality, but I have to decline, even if he calls it "puffery."

Key points about the four posts

- Gorski relied heavily on an article by Kylar Loussikian in *The Australian* for his information, without much checking about its accuracy or balance.
- He used the technique of guilt-by-association in the same way as Loussikian.
- Gorski addressed the key arguments in Judy's thesis primarily via my one-paragraph summary.

²⁰ "An orchestrated attack on a PhD thesis," 1 February 2016, <http://comments.bmartin.cc/2016/02/01/an-orchestrated-attack-on-a-phd-thesis/>

²¹ <http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2016/02/01/from-deep-in-the-heart-of-the-organized-campaign-against-judy-wilymans-antivaccine-phd-thesis/>

- Gorski did not show an understanding of the Australian PhD examination process, including the fact that it is more closely modelled on standard methods of peer review of scholarly articles and books than the US system.
- Gorski assumed the authority to conclusively judge a social science PhD thesis, and to do so within one day of it being available.
- He drew on a rich lode of abusive language.

Conflicting perspectives

It would be possible to go into more detail about Gorski's evidence and arguments, but more useful to indicate some of the assumptions where he and I part company. Differing assumptions help to explain other differences.

Two of Gorski's assumptions are that vaccination policy is a scientific issue and that scientists have a special entitlement to pass judgement on any writing about vaccination policy. My view, in contrast, is that vaccination policy is not just about science, but also involves matters of ethics and politics, politics in the sense of the exercise of power. Scientists have no special capacity, nor a warrant, for passing judgement on matters of ethics and politics. Framing the vaccination debate as science versus pseudoscience, as Gorski does, hides or denies the roles of ethics, politics, economics, psychology and other dimensions.

These assumptions can help explain Gorski's criticisms of my writings about Judy's thesis and the vaccination debate more generally. As a scientist claiming a special capacity to judge writing about vaccination, Gorski believes that his criticisms are about the quality of the thesis. In contrast, my approach to the criticisms of the thesis reflect a sociological perspective: I look to social factors to explain why there has been such an outpouring of hostility towards Judy's thesis.

As noted above, in "Judy Wilyman, PhD" I listed four tell-tale signs that criticisms of a thesis are part of an attack. It turns out that these same four tell-tale signs readily apply to Gorski's criticisms of my work on dissent.

1. They attack the person, not just their work.

Gorski repeatedly criticises me personally, for example calling me disingenuous and a crank.

2. They concentrate on alleged flaws in the work, focusing on small details and ignoring the central points.

Gorski relies for his criticisms of my work on short pieces written for general

audiences, not mentioning my more substantive articles.

3. *They make no comparisons with other students or theses or with standard practice, but rather make criticisms in isolation or according to their own assumed standards.*

Gorski does not compare my work on suppression of dissent with any others in the field. (Here I apply point #3 to my research rather than to students and theses.)

4. *They assume that findings contrary to what they believe is correct must be wrong or dangerous or both.*

Gorski repeatedly claims I am wrong (about Judy's thesis, about dissent, about SAVN).

Social science analysis

Gorski undertakes a critique of my work in a manner typical of a scientist unfamiliar with social science methods. He proceeds by presenting some quotes and criticising them, as if this is sufficient to rebut my ideas.

A well-developed social science critique requires a fair bit more than this, and something different. It requires reading a sufficiently large and representative selection of primary and secondary material to understand the individual's work and its wider context. For a critique of my work, this would involve becoming familiar with my writing on the vaccination controversy, on other scientific controversies, and the wider field within which I work, science and technology studies. It also desirably involves deploying some social theory in order to make sense of the material studied, and elucidating assumptions and methods as well as presenting conclusions.

Here are a few examples of critiques that I've carried out that illustrate the application of social science techniques.

- *Nuclear Knights*,²² a detailed analysis of the pro-nuclear views of Sir Ernest Titterton and Sir Philip Baxter.

- "The naked experts,"²³ an analysis of the pro-nuclear views of Leslie Kemeny.

²² *Nuclear Knights* (Canberra: Rupert Public Interest Movement, 1980), <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/80nk/>

²³ *The Ecologist*, volume 12, number 4, July/August 1982, pages 149–157, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/82ecol.html>

- “Social construction of an ‘attack on science’,”²⁴ a review of Paul Gross and Norman Levitt’s book *Higher Superstition*. This critical review is especially relevant to Gorski’s approach.

- “How nonviolence is misrepresented,”²⁵ a critique of Peter Gelderloos’ book *How Nonviolence Protects the State*.

- “The politics of Gene Sharp,”²⁶ an evaluation of Sharp’s contributions to the study of nonviolent action.

My commentary here on Gorski’s blog posts is not intended to be a comprehensive critique of his work. That would require study of his other writings in the context of related work. My main aim here is to indicate some of the differences in our approaches to the issue of what Gorski called “antivaccine pseudoscience” and I refer to as dissent in science. I realise that Gorski is writing blog posts and that these present opinion and do not need to conform to the norms of scholarly documentation and writing. Even so, distinct differences between our approaches are clear, as I have outlined. Readers can judge for themselves by inspecting Gorski’s posts and my articles.

Gorski is scathing about those who write about vaccination policy without having, in his estimation, proper understanding of technical matters. Yet he has no qualms about commenting about work in the social sciences, notably mine and Judy’s, without having a proper understanding of expectations in the relevant fields. He asserts his own authority in the social science domain over that of expert examiners with publications and decades of experience in their fields.

So here is a way to understand the difference between Gorski’s perspective and mine. Among other things, each of us is proposing an explanation for the outpouring of condemnation of Judy’s thesis. Gorski attributes this to the contents of the thesis itself. He thus seeks to explain a social phenomenon primarily by objective facts — the contents of the thesis — about which he and other vaccination advocates

²⁴ *Social Studies of Science*, volume 26, number 1, February 1996, pp. 161-173, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/96sss1.html>

²⁵ *Gandhi Marg*, volume 30, number 2, July-September 2008, pp. 235–257, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/08gm2.html>

²⁶ *Gandhi Marg*, volume 35, number 2, July-September 2013, pp. 201–230, <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/13gm.html>

claim special authority for passing judgement.

Gorski takes aim at my references to an “orchestrated attack” and an “organised campaign” against Judy’s thesis. However, he does not attempt to explain why so many people criticised her thesis so soon after it was posted online, nor why so many of them drew on the same examples and rhetoric. Kylar Loussikian, a journalist writing for *The Australian*, had no previous record writing about vaccination or about related health issues. Are we to suppose that he routinely peruses PhD theses newly posted online and on his own initiative noticed that Judy’s thesis was uniquely newsworthy? Are we to suppose, in addition, that he took the initiative to read through her thesis and extract quotes that he would hold up to ridicule, as well as investigating my supervision record and picking out for attention my supervision of Michael Primero in the 1990s? And that he did all this within 24 hours? Are we to suppose that after Loussikian’s article appeared on 13 January 2016, a wide range of people happened to read it in *The Australian* and independently decided to write commentaries?

An alternative is that opponents of Judy’s work — SAVNers and others — fed material to Loussikian, and that after his article appeared, they alerted various vaccination advocates, including Gorski, who wrote their own criticisms. Meanwhile, others read Loussikian’s article and made comment or took action on their own. This is what I refer to as an orchestrated attack. It doesn’t mean that a cabal is manipulating every action, only that concerted efforts were made to formulate criticisms and mobilise support. My approach, in contrast to Gorski’s, thus is to attempt to explain a social phenomenon, the condemnation of Judy’s thesis, by social factors, including the existence of a long-running campaign against outspoken vaccination critics in Australia.

Gorski adopts an approach to a social phenomenon — outrage over Judy’s thesis — that assumes there is a correct explanation, and furthermore that he is in possession of the truth and other explanations deserve contempt. From my perspective, Gorski’s explanation is inadequate: it seeks to explain social dynamics as deriving directly from material reality, namely outrage deriving directly from the contents of a thesis. This approach does not even begin to explain why some theses and some issues generate attention while others pass unnoticed. My perspective is different: social phenomena require social explanations.

Gorski does not fully articulate the assumptions underlying his approach to

social dynamics. Rather, he asserts his views, forcefully condemning contrary views, without addressing the differences in methodological and epistemological assumptions between his own approach and that of those he criticises. The result is that Gorski's posts are good examples of argumentation that is unreflective, with little or no attention to its own underlying assumptions. In short, his posts represent partisanship. That is obvious enough at a superficial level, but it is also apparent in the assumptions that structure what he says and how he goes about it.

Of course, much of what occurs in the vaccination debate can be classified as partisanship. Unfortunately, so much of Gorski's energy goes into making assertions and in name-calling that there seems to be little opportunity for encouraging dialogue and understanding.