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Preparing for advocacy, resisting attack

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Abstract. When scientists engage in public advocacy, or indeed in any public comment on controversial issues, there is a risk they will come under attack. To reduce the possibility of reprisals, it is worthwhile preparing, in several ways, including learning from the experience of others and making mild comments to see the reaction. If there is a serious risk, reducing expenditures and transferring assets can provide extra financial security. Building networks for personal support is crucially important, including family and friends, work colleagues and various others. When coming under attack, it is important to document actions, seek advice and behave sensibly. The most powerful counter to attacks is mobilisation of support. It is important to support scientists who come under attack, as this protects scientific freedom for all.

Additional keywords: dissent, reprisals, resistance, suppression

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Introduction

In the early 1970s, Richard and Val Routley wrote a pioneering book, 'The Fight for the Forests', that gave a comprehensive critique of Australian forestry theory and practice (Routley and Routley 1973). Richard Routley was at the time a tenured member of the Philosophy Department at the Australian National University (ANU) and, as such, was relatively invulnerable to direct attack. His wife, philosopher Val Routley, had no paid job. Three editions of 'Fight for the Forests' were published through the ANU's Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS). Opponents of the book put pressure on RSSS to block publication by a request for vetting by the Forestry Department at ANU. Richard Routley was banned from the Forestry Department library for six months (Routley and Plumwood 1986). Later, when these censorship efforts were publicised, the head of the Forestry Department denied there had been any ban, though Richard Routley's research assistants, who used the library on his behalf, confirmed it (Martin 1997, p. 106).

In 1971, Clyde Manwell, newly appointed professor of zoology at the University of Adelaide, wrote a letter to the *Adelaide Advertiser* questioning aspects of the state government's program of spraying for fruit fly. The letter, jointly authored by Manwell's wife, Ann Baker, was sent from their private address; the editor added Manwell's university affiliation. This letter led to comment in state parliament. The university's senior professor of zoology, H. G. Andrewartha, wrote a letter of complaint to the university's vice-chancellor, and this led to efforts to have Manwell dismissed. The following four years featured investigations, media commentary, court cases and student protests, before all the charges against Manwell were finally dismissed (Baker 1986).

These are two instances in which public advocacy on environmental issues led to adverse actions against the individuals speaking out. There are numerous such documented cases concerning forestry, nuclear power, pesticides and other issues (Deyo *et al.* 1997; Moran 1998; Martin 1999; Delborne 2008; Lewis 2014). Furthermore, the documented cases are undoubtedly a small proportion of the total number of cases, because relatively few are publicised beyond the few people directly involved.

The methods used against targets include censorship of talks and articles, denying grant applications, restricting access to research materials, rejecting job applications, denying tenure, ostracism, circulation of derogatory rumours, dismissal and blacklisting. These and other methods can be classified into a few general categories: censorship, attacking reputations, and hindering careers.

The most common scenario for attacks operates like this. Someone does research or teaching or speaks out on a topic and poses a threat to the interests of powerful groups, typically government or industry. As a result, reprisals are visited on the individual. Whatever the effect on the target, attacks send a strong message to others about the risks of challenging dominant interests. This can be called the chilling effect, to use an expression commonly applied in relation to the media (Barendt *et al.* 1997).

Advocacy is a frequent trigger for reprisals, but sometimes scientists are attacked just for doing research. A scientist can undertake research on a sensitive topic (for example, the effects of atrazine on frogs: Aviv 2014), and publish in scientific journals. If no one pays any attention to the articles, the researcher may be able to continue unhindered. But if others (for example, environmental groups) publicise the articles in their campaigning, then the scientist may become a target.

Therefore it is convenient to distinguish between two types of advocacy. When a scientist speaks out, taking a public stand on

an issue of social importance, this is overt advocacy. When a scientist only does technical research and publishes in scholarly forums, and triggers opposition, this can be called inadvertent advocacy. It is advocacy purely by the choice of topic and the findings, without any attempt to make public comment.

By convention, the label 'advocacy' is applied to those who challenge conventional wisdom or who challenge powerful groups. In contrast, those who support orthodoxy present themselves, and are commonly seen, as having views based on science. However, those who speak in defence of orthodox views should be recognised as advocates just as much as those who criticise orthodox views. When scientists disagree, it is common for them to attribute their own views to evidence and logic and to attribute contrary views to contingent factors such as prejudice and conflict of interest (Mulkay and Gilbert 1982).

It is far more likely for those who challenge the dominant view to come under attack. This is predictable when the dominant scientific view coincides with the most powerful players in the issue. For example, the dominant scientific view about pesticides is that they are safe and beneficial, coinciding with the interests of pesticide manufacturers. The one major exception to this configuration is the climate change debate, in which the dominant scientific view, that global warming is occurring and mostly due to human activities, is contrary to the interests of fossil fuel companies.

Even for scientists who avoid advocacy themselves and who are unlikely to ever be attacked, it is worthwhile understanding what is at stake. Over the course of a career, a colleague at one's workplace or in one's field of study may be targeted. One option is to say this is none of your business and let the targeted scientist deal with the problem. When nearly all scientists adopt this sort of bystander role, the few scientists under attack stand little chance of survival and the result may be a contraction of scientific freedom for all. On the other hand, if even a few colleagues provide support for a targeted dissident, this can make a huge difference psychologically and practically. Collective action is the basis for social movements and much beneficial social change. Therefore, the more scientists – whether or not they ever want to become activists – who learn about advocacy, its risks and how to survive attacks, the more prepared the scientific community will be to counter threats to scientific freedom.

There is yet another reason for learning about how to resist attacks: scientists can come under attack for all sorts of reasons aside from advocacy. Scientists sometimes can be targeted because of their background, appearance, mannerisms, ethnicity or a host of other characteristics; they may run up against a bullying boss; or they may be caught in the crossfire during a conflict in which they are not involved. Many of the same methods helpful to those involved in advocacy are relevant to scientists targeted for other reasons.

In the following sections, I present suggestions for scientists who want to prepare for and deter attacks on them due to their advocacy. The next section, on preparation, looks at ways to estimate the likely responses to advocacy. The following sections address financial preparation and building personal support. Sometimes, despite preparation, advocates come under attack. I describe standard advice for dealing with attacks, including the options of using official channels and mobilising support.

This advice is based on my studies of suppression of dissent in science (e.g. Martin 1981, 1999, 2008; Martin *et al.* 1986), supplemented by my contact with dissident scientists. Related to this, I have talked with hundreds of whistleblowers in a range of occupations (police, teachers, public servants, corporate employees and others). The methods of attack are much the same, and most of the lessons from the experiences of whistleblowers (Martin 2013) are relevant to scientists who come under attack. Because the patterns are so similar in different fields, I offer only a few examples here. Nearly every case of suppression of dissent is an incredibly complicated saga, with contested claims about who did what and why, so a one-paragraph summary cannot begin to capture its complexity. The summaries of two cases at the beginning of this article are designed to highlight a few salient features of suppression cases. Current cases in conservation biology are bound to evoke strong emotions and thus ironically may not be the most effective way to convey general lessons.

Preparing 1: learning

Ideally, anyone speaking out on virtually any issue should consider the possibility of reprisals and prepare accordingly. This might seem superfluous when the risk is apparently nonexistent. When the research is conventional and the media release is approved through the usual channels, negative consequences are unlikely. However, whenever the topic is potentially controversial, there is a risk, so it is worthwhile making some preparations.

A useful step is to find out what happened to others previously who were doing similar work. This may not be easy. If possible, it is valuable to talk to experienced scientists who have worked in the same area. Scientists who have engaged in controversial topics themselves, and who have a public profile, often are repositories of information. They frequently have personal experiences of pushback against their own work, and often they are contacted by others with stories about their own treatment. Clyde Manwell, as a result of the long-running attempt to dismiss him from the University of Adelaide, was contacted by dozens of other scientists telling of their own difficulties.

Another useful step is to test the water. For example, at a seminar or informal gathering, it can be revealing to raise some fairly mild questions about dominant views and see what happens, if anything. The response might be hostility, indifference or even enthusiasm. It is also possible to talk to senior figures and ask, 'What do you think would happen if someone came out on this issue?'. With indirect questions, it is sometimes possible to elicit revealing responses, even if they are only apparent through tone of voice or raised eyebrows. However, information obtained this way is far from conclusive, because responses to overt advocacy sometimes can be unexpected and disproportionate to anything done.

Your own image is an important factor. If you are seen as a careful and reserved scientist, then ironically it can be more risky to start speaking out, because this clashes with the image others have of you. (On the other hand, your stand can be more persuasive so far as they are concerned.) If, instead, you have regularly spoken out on various issues and have acquired a

reputation as being argumentative yet fair-minded and open to dialogue, there is probably less risk in undertaking advocacy. It is part of your persona (Felder 2009).

Learning about precedents, testing the water and cultivating an image can be helpful in deciding whether and how to speak out on an issue. However, there are no guarantees. Whether your contribution to public debate is welcomed or condemned depends greatly on local contingencies. Therefore, learning to understand and navigate through the organisation that employs you is worthwhile (Wyatt and Hare 1997; Chambers 2004; Crawshaw 2007).

Imagine this hypothetical yet common scenario. A media report on your research stimulates a cascade of social media commentary. An executive at an affected company informally complains to one of your superiors, without any expectation of action. Nevertheless, this superior decides to pre-empt further possible damage to relationships by making life difficult for you. Your research is hindered by administrative delays. Your leave requests, previously approved routinely, are blocked. Your proposals for new projects are lost and then rejected. Some of your colleagues, previously friendly, now seem to avoid you. These are indications that you are being subject to reprisals, but nothing seemingly serious enough for you to complain about formally, and you are never told why. And no one could actually tell you why, because you have no contact with the executive who talked with your superior, and anyway neither of them remembers the conversation. Your superior has an altered perception of your work, and sincerely attributes this to a change in your performance or to changes in priorities in the unit.

The important point is that those who suppress dissent are seldom scheming how to get at you. Instead, they genuinely believe in the virtue of their own actions, just as those who commit horrific acts usually think they are justified and that what they did is not that significant (Baumeister 1997). If you can figure out how they understand the world, and understand you, this can help in preparing and resisting.

Preparing 2: finances

Sometimes you know you are taking a risk by speaking out, yet you believe the issue is so important that you want to do it anyway. If this is a likely prospect, there are several things you can do to prepare.

In the worst scenario, you end up losing your job, which possibly means not having an income for months or even years. As insurance against this possibility, it is worthwhile living frugally and building up your savings and your assets. The more financially secure you are, the less vulnerable you are to reprisals and the more confident you can be when taking a stand.

Another risk is being sued for defamation or some other trumped-up charge. Pieter Cohen, a Harvard researcher, did research on dietary supplements and spoke out critically about health hazards. The owner of a supplement company sued Cohen for US$200 million, an example of a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation or SLAPP (Pring and Canan 1996). Even though the state had passed an anti-SLAPP law, a judge ruled it unconstitutional because it bypassed a trial by jury. Most SLAPPs are launched without any expectation of winning in court, but are designed to deter criticism. Cohen and Harvard won the case. Jared Wheat, who sued, was reported as saying he hoped his legal action would deter other researchers from looking at supplements (Robbins 2017).

Sometimes employers support employees who are sued, paying the legal costs. This possibility should always be pursued, though some employers leave employees to fend on their own. It is important to realise that few threats to sue are followed by writs and that most cases are settled before going to court. It is worth investigating techniques for making legal threats and actions damaging for the plaintiff (Martin and Gray 2005).

If you have a financial adviser, mention the risk of being sued as something to take into account. It may be wise to transfer most of your assets to a family member—one who is not taking risks!

Preparing 3: personal support

It is crucially important to build personal support. Being an advocate can make you vulnerable to attack, but if you have many supporters, you are much safer.

Supporters can play several functions, all of which are important. Some will act on your behalf by, for example, commenting on social media, arguing your case in a staff meeting or writing a reference. Others will provide advice and guidance, helping you make wise decisions. Yet others will offer emotional support, being sensitive to your wellbeing. Then there are those who sympathise with your stand or your right to take it but who do nothing overt. They are important too, because they have chosen not to join or endorse the attackers.

One group of potential supporters is your family and close friends, who usually are not work colleagues. Having family and friends on your side can provide vital emotional backing. Therefore, it is usually better to brief them about your activities, motivations and risks, so they will not be surprised if you encounter reprisals. However, in some cases family and friends are ultra-cautious and advise against advocacy, caring more about financial security and not rocking the boat than about a cause. Such a situation is challenging, and may be a factor in deciding whether to be anonymous.

Another group of potential supporters is your work colleagues. If they are sympathetic, you are in a far stronger position. Therefore, it is worthwhile keeping on good terms with them, being generous with your time and being concerned about their lives and careers. If you seem self-centred and glory-seeking, you are far less likely to gain their trust and support. Be aware, though, that if reprisals begin, some colleagues may shun you for fear they will also become targets. If this happens, it is usually better to be understanding, however disappointed you might be.

Another group at work is your superiors, right up to the top of the organisation. It can be useful to make yourself known as a reliable, trustworthy worker. Having a confidant at higher levels can be very useful.

Although having support inside the organisation is extremely important, it is not always possible. Sometimes there are rifts, power plays, animosities and double-crosses that can hurt even those with the best people skills and track records. Indeed, if you are a productive scientist, this can sometimes be a disadvantage because you are seen as a threat to lesser performers and narcissistic colleagues. Negotiating your way through a toxic organisational environment can be difficult even without the

complication of advocacy (for advice, see Wyatt and Hare 1997).

Outside supporters are also worth cultivating. This can include scientists around the world and various others, including politicians, journalists and activists. Some scientists are well connected via conferences and online forums; for others, a starting point is to build good relations with a small number of individuals who know you and your work, and who in turn have significant connections.

It is often useful for others to know that you have a support network. The greater your reputation and the more powerful your network, the less likely you are to come under attack.

Resisting attack

Despite the best preparation, advocacy sometimes triggers attacks by opponents. This can take several forms, including denunciations in the mass media, rumour-mongering on social media, complaints from corporations to your employer, complaints from your colleagues to your boss, and direct action from your boss or senior management. A common scenario is that senior figures in a corporation or government department make a call to someone in your organisation, leading to action against you. Another common scenario is that someone in your organisation takes the initiative against you, without any external prodding, but often in service of the imagined desires of external groups.

If you come under attack, several things are crucially important. One is to collect documentation of every facet of the attack: copies of letters, emails and social media comments; witness statements; and a detailed diary of conversations and events. Having a record of what happened makes it far easier to challenge unfair treatment, especially when others lie about what happened.

Second, it is vital to seek advice before acting. This can range from checking drafts of messages with a friend to meeting with supporters to plan a strategy. This is the time to rely on your support network.

Third, it is important to behave in a seemingly calm and serious fashion. When you're under attack, this is difficult. You are being treated unfairly and this may cause you to become angry and upset, with the risk of emotional outbursts. These are to be avoided, because your opponents are looking for any weakness in your behaviour or performance in order to justify actions taken against you. By continuing to be a sober and responsible colleague, you make the attacks seem more unfair.

There are two general strategies for resistance: official channels and mobilising support (Martin 2013). Official channels include grievance procedures, appealing to senior management, ombudsmen and courts, among others. These are bodies that are supposed to provide justice. Most whistleblowers initially use official channels to report their concerns, typically first going to their boss and then to various watchdog agencies. However, research shows that official channels only occasionally provide help (De Maria 1999). Official channels are typically slow, procedural (they address details rather than the central injustice) and rely on experts (such as lawyers).

The other general strategy for resistance is mobilising support. This means winning people over to your perspective, with some of them taking action on your behalf. To mobilise support requires getting relevant information out to receptive audiences. This is where the information you collected comes into play. It is extremely useful to write a short summary of the key issues: the context, what happened to you and others, and what should be done about it. Short means no more than a page. It can be backed up with documents and supplementary information. The summary is like a calling card. It can be sent to journalists or to potential supporters, and posted online.

The short summary needs to be crafted carefully. Every statement needs to be accurate and factual, so it is better to omit serious transgressions if they can't be confirmed: a few documented injustices are better than a long list of grievances when one or two can be contested. Your opponents will comb through your summary looking for weak points, and attack those weak points. To be effective in communicating outside your workplace and perhaps outside the country, as well as outside your discipline, context is required, such as the significance of your research, the location of your workplace, and expected protocols in your field. For example, if scientists normally can give talks at conferences but you have been blocked from attending one, the norm and your treatment need to be stated.

The power of mobilising support comes from the numbers and diversity of people involved. The leaders of most organisations intensely hate adverse publicity, preferring to spend a million dollars of organisation money fighting a court case than have the organisation tarnished in the media. When you mobilise support, you increase the prospects of adverse publicity. This could be through mass media stories, social media campaigns, letters from supporters on your behalf, and through networks. The more people who know about a case, the more likely that influence will be exerted indirectly (for example, via the daughter of a friend's colleague who knows a director).

One of the risks in mobilising support is to be labelled an activist scientist, with the implicit assumptions that this is a deviation from proper behaviour and that dominant groups are not involved in power plays. To counter this sort of framing, one option is to appear to be separate from the fray. The best scenario is for a group of supporters to act on your behalf, consulting with you but the supporters taking all the initiatives. Anyone other than you is seen as more independent and hence more credible. However, in quite a few scenarios you may need to be the prime mover, writing letters, talking to the media and instigating meetings with supporters. The benefits of mobilising support usually outweigh the negative associations of being an activist.

The strategies of using official channels and mobilising support each involve preparing documents. For a court case, you may need to spend days or weeks preparing a long and detailed submission that will be read by only a few people. Scientists are usually quite good at preparing long detailed reports. For a media release or public statement, you need to spend quite a bit of time preparing and checking it. It is short, but should be checked by outsiders who offer feedback to make it readable. Some scientists are good at writing brief summaries for general audiences, but nearly everyone finds it a challenge to write about their own experiences for outsiders.

In many cases, communicating online is vitally important. Scientists are skilled in writing scholarly papers, going through drafts and peer scrutiny. It is worth putting a similar level of care into crafting engaging and persuasive emails, tweets, Facebook

comments, blog posts and other forms of messaging. Also important are connections between platforms. For example, it can sometimes be useful to put a detailed analysis on a website accompanied by a short accessible summary, and then circulate the summary and/or web address via various social media platforms. Using images to attract attention and encapsulate concerns is also valuable.

Dealing with consequences

The strategy of mobilising support is far more likely to be effective, but requires skills that are not part of a scientist's usual repertoire. This is a time to rely on others and to learn quickly about media operations, campaigning strategies and the dynamics of organisations.

In one of the worst scenarios, you lose your job. If you've prepared fully, you have minimised your expenses, can survive quite a while on your savings or the income of a supportive family member, and your extensive networks make finding another job relatively easy. However, dissidents and whistleblowers who lose their jobs are usually unprepared, and the consequences can be devastating, including damaged finances, health, relationships and careers.

A common response to being dismissed is to go to court seeking compensation for unfair dismissal. (Reinstatement is rare, indeed almost unheard of.) The most common outcome is a settlement, in which you receive some payment, and nearly always are expected to sign an agreement that prevents you from discussing the settlement and perhaps anything about the circumstances concerning your dismissal. This is called a gagging or silencing clause. In essence, you are being bought off to remain silent.

At this point, it is often worthwhile maintaining a dual strategy. As well as pursuing official channels to challenge your dismissal, you can mobilise support. Lawyers often advise against seeking publicity; this is because it is out of their control and skill set. If you go ahead, they will have to adjust. The benefit of publicity is that it raises the stakes for your employer. Their reputation is taking a hit, so they are more likely to settle the case and give you a higher payment.

If you feel obliged to sign a silencing clause, you can still ensure that the issue is kept alive by giving all your information to others – before you sign. Only you are bound by the clause, and others can continue to campaign and to point to your dismissal as an example of unfairness and the importance of what you've spoken out about.

Sometimes preparation, support networks and campaigning combine with good luck, so that when you are attacked, this is turned into a public relations nightmare for your opponents. Instead of shutting you down, there is greater agitation and far more attention to your ideas than would have occurred if your opponents had just left you alone.

One of the primary functions of attacks on dissidents is to set an example to others. Shutting down a single outspoken scientist is less important than warning others that they should keep quiet if they value their careers. Therefore, if you are prepared and you and your supporters can mount an effective campaign against censorship, denigration and harassment, this also has a powerful demonstration effect. It shows to your employers and their allies how risky it is to suppress dissent and shows to other scientists that people are willing to defend dissent.

Conclusion

Advocacy can sometimes be risky, leading to attacks on a scientist's reputation, research opportunities and career. In many cases the sequence is predictable: a scientist does research or speaks out on a topic or in a way that poses a threat to a powerful group, most commonly a government or large corporation. Then reprisals begin, ranging from petty harassment to dismissal. However, although the sequence is predictable, its occurrence is not. Whether a scientist is targeted depends on numerous contingent factors, including the personalities and sensitivities of key figures, the current prominence of the issue, and opportunities for taking action.

Although there are no reliable statistics about the number and frequency of scientists who suffer repercussions due to their advocacy, serious reprisals are not very common. (High-profile advocacy is also not very common.) Many scientists will go through their entire careers and never encounter any problems. Even so, it is wise to be prepared, because preparation is a type of insurance against the worst outcomes. Preparation includes understanding the risks of advocacy, reducing vulnerabilities and building networks of support. It also includes developing skills in communicating about social issues in ways that show both knowledge and responsibility.

It is also important to understand the risks of advocacy in order to be able to help others. Although directly coming under attack is not common, it is likely that a colleague in the field will encounter difficulties. It is important to know that rumours will be spread, that targets will be isolated and may act unwisely, and that personal support can make a difference. Even just a comment or gesture of solidarity can make a big difference to a scientist under siege.

Helping others who are attacked is vital, because the single most important factor in resistance to suppression is collective action. Individuals can be picked off and taken down, but when groups of scientists stand together, and have the open support of citizen groups as well, attacks are far less likely to succeed, and can sometimes backfire, generating greater attention to the issues of concern. Therefore, it can be worthwhile acting on principle, supporting scientific freedom, even when you dislike the person being attacked or disagree with their viewpoint. By supporting scientific freedom for others, including opponents, you protect it for yourself.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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