Stamping Out Dissent

Too often, unconventional or unpopular scientific views are simply suppressed

BY BRIAN MARTIN

Textbooks present science as a noble search for truth, in which progress depends on questioning established ideas. But for many scientists, this is a cruel myth. They know from bitter experience that disagreeing with the dominant view is dangerous—especially when that view is backed by powerful interest groups. Call it suppression of intellectual dissent. The usual pattern is that someone does research or speaks out in a way that threatens a powerful interest group, typically a government, industry or professional body. As a result, representatives of that group attack the critic's ideas or the critic personally—by censoring writing, blocking publications, denying appointments or promotions, withdrawing research grants, taking legal actions, harassing, blacklisting, spreading rumors.

Dr. Melvin Reuber worked at the Frederick Cancer Research Facility in Maryland studying links between pesticides and cancer. A highly productive scientist, he says he regularly earned glowing performance reports. In 1981 he received a scathing report. The bulk of it found its way into Pesticide & Toxic Chemical News, a trade magazine for the petrochemical industry. The item was circulated around the world and used to discredit Reuber wherever his findings were cited to question the safety of pesticides.

The expression of dissenting views may not seem like much of a threat to a powerful organization, yet sometimes it triggers an amazingly hostile response. The reason is that a single dissenter can puncture an illusion of unanimity. Perhaps nowhere is the façade of unanimity stronger than in the debate over fluoridating public drinking water to prevent dental caries. Proponents of the practice roundly deny that there is any debate, much less reason for one, at all.

Dr. John Colquhoun, a New Zealand dentist and dental administrator, had long supported fluoridation. But in 1980 he took a world trip to study the issue and subsequently changed his mind. After he was quoted in a newspaper warning parents not to let their young children swallow too much fluoridated toothpaste, Colquhoun received a letter from the New Zealand Health Department. It said that if he could not adhere to official policy recommending the use of fluoride toothpaste by young children, one option was to resign. No further action was taken against him.

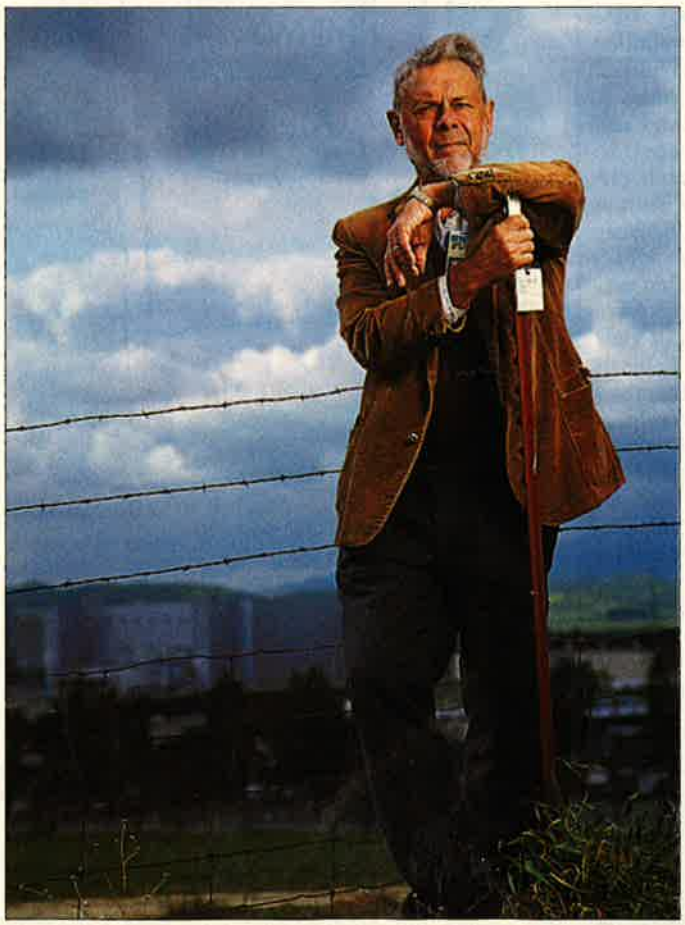
Those who launch the attacks explain everything from censorship to dismissal on the ground of poor performance by the person concerned. No one admits to suppressing dissent. And indeed, there is no way to be *absolutely* sure that suppression has occurred. But there are some good indicators. One is the double-standard test: is similar treatment given to other scientists who have similar levels of performance? In typical suppression cases, other scientists with equal or lesser records are not attacked. They didn't rock the boat.

But dramatic cases of transfers and dismissals give a misleading impression of patterns of suppression. The most common tactics are probably to block publications or appointments. These are incredibly difficult to document.

How frequent is suppression? No one has done a systematic survey. But having studied this issue for the past decade and a half, it is my experience that the problem is much more pervasive than most people realize. There's a sustained pattern of suppression in some areas, such as nuclear power, fluoridation, pesticides and forestry.

Dr. Hugh DeWitt is a theoretical physicist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, a nuclear-weapons lab. DeWitt has long been a critic of aspects of U.S. nuclear-weapons policy. In 1979 he filed affidavits in support of The Progressive, a magazine about to publish information on the workings of the hydrogen bomb—obtained from public sources like encyclopedias—when the federal government sought an injunction. The lab placed a letter of warning in DeWitt's personnel file. After scientific organizations came to his defense, DeWitt reached a settlement with the lab, and in 1980 the letter was removed from his file.

One often-advocated solution to the problem of suppression is whistle-blower legislation, which is said to support those who speak out in the public interest. The reality is not so wonderful. It covers only limited forms of retaliation—not blocking publications or spreading rumors, for instance. Indeed, the focus on whistle-blowing gives the illusion that most attacks on dissent take the form of attacks on whistle-blowers. This is much too narrow a perspective. Furthermore, experience shows that only a small fraction of complaints are taken up and an even smaller fraction are vindicated, due more to a lack of enthusiasm for defending whistle-blowers than to a shortage of worthy cases.



ROBERT HOLMGREN

A flap with the federal government over nuclear policy: *DeWitt*

Dr. John Coulter was a medical researcher at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science in Adelaide, South Australia, from 1959 to 1980. An outspoken environmentalist, he aroused the wrath of a number of chemical companies owing to his comments, made in his "private capacity," about their products. In 1980 he tested a chemical used to sterilize equipment at the institute and found that it could cause mutations in bacteria. He released his report to the workers as well as to the official committee. Soon after, Coulter was dismissed from his post. He later became a prominent Australian politician.

Suppression of intellectual dissent can inflict large costs on society. Among those suppressed have been the engineers who tried to point out problems with the Challenger space shuttle that caused it to blow up. More fundamentally, suppression is a denial of the open dialogue and debate that are the foundation of a free society. Even worse than the silencing of dissidents is the chilling effect such practices have on others. For every individual who speaks out, numerous others decide to play it safe and keep quiet. More serious than external censorship is the problem of self-censorship.

What can a scientist do to fight intellectual suppression? Use official channels only if your case is cut and dried. Otherwise they are likely to drain your energy without yielding the desired result. For similar reasons, legal channels are seldom fruitful: suppression is difficult to prove in court. A publicity campaign, on the other hand, can be effective. This might involve sympathizers writing letters to an organization, circulating a petition or getting stories into the media. Look for allies, including other dissidents, civil libertarians and social activists. The best chance of challenging suppression lies in mobilizing support from those who believe that your point of view deserves to be heard.

The existence of suppression of dissent as a pervasive feature of science calls for a reconceptualization of the enterprise. Rather than being solely a search for the truth, science is closely bound up with the exercise of power. This is normally acknowledged for totalitarian regimes and for military dictatorships, where intellectual suppression is overt. But the same sorts of processes occur, usually in a more subtle fashion, in liberal democracies. From Copernicus to Darwin to Einstein, as well as countless others who have challenged the conventional wisdom, it has been the dissidents, the outsiders, the contrarians who have spurred science on. We should protect and encourage dissent, even when we disagree with the dissidents.

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