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Commentary on “Objectivity in Controversial Science Communication: A Case Study of Kevin Folta”

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1. Introduction

Goodwin’s goal in this paper is to grapple with the problem of objectivity in the communication of politically controversial scientific research. When it comes to scientific research on less controversial topics – topics that are maybe curiosities, or topics that bear on how to lose weight, avoid cancer, and so on – it’s often difficult to get people to be sufficiently skeptical, and not to embrace every single study that comes along affirming some kind of correlation between properties in rodents or in small samples of the human population. (And, for those who might have missed it, John Oliver has just done a nice piece a couple of weeks ago on science communication on his HBO show, *Last Week Tonight*.)

Goodwin’s paper deals with the opposite sort of problem: when the topic is very politically charged or otherwise controversial, people will often be very hostile to any research that purports to establish results that support the opposite side of the controversy. And the person or group that communicates scientific results in such cases will often be suspected of being biased – either that they’re taking corporate money, or they’re pursuing a radical political agenda, or something along these lines. This makes life difficult for people who genuinely want to spread relevant information so that governments can lay down responsible legislation, and so that people at large can make informed decisions. So Goodwin’s goal is to develop or identify ways that people who are in fact objective (unbiased, impartial) can also *appear* to be objective.

2. Take no industry money

This is a real challenge. Goodwin notes that the easiest suggestion to make is just to recommend that scientists not take industry money. After all, once you’ve taken money from industries to help you conduct your research, your audience is immediately going to worry that you are biased in favour of the corporation that funded your work.

Goodwin rightly notes that this approach is very difficult to implement. After all, someone’s got to pay for the equipment and the research assistants and the hours you put into it! And universities often *very* actively encourage faculty to seek external funding. So it’s very difficult to adopt this strategy of not taking industry money.

This is all correct, I think, but I also think there’s more to say. As soon as a researcher receives money from an organization that has clear political or commercial goals, it just is going to appear to people that she’s going to be biased in favour of her funding organization. Perhaps she’ll be able to hide her biases very well; perhaps she’ll even believe herself to be unbiased. But there’s always a clear incentive not to bite the hand that feeds you, and this can lead to both overt

biases and subtle implicit biases on the part of researchers. As much as a researcher might work to undermine the appearance of bias, I worry that the appearance of bias will remain, and that it will remain reasonable for audiences to be skeptical of the things that such a researcher reports, unless and until her findings are corroborated by independent sources.

Perhaps a way to avoid the appearance of bias in science communication would be to establish a science reporting organization that would be at arm's length from all political and commercial organizations, and also from the people who conduct any of the relevant research – this would be an organization that could be seen to be impartial, and that would have a mandate of reading and responsibly reporting on scientific research. (Something to do for science what Politifact does for American politics.) This, to me, would be an ideal solution, but I recognize that there are practical challenges: for one thing, it would itself need to be funded, and its funding would have to come in a form that doesn't re-introduce the appearance of bias. For another, such an institution would be vulnerable to corruption, so effective safeguards would have to be put in place to prevent that. Still, in principle I think it's a neat idea.

3. Assuming the sale

Goodwin describes Folta's strategy to undermine the appearance of bias, a strategy that rests on presuming¹ that the audience is cooperative, and genuinely interested in learning about GMOs rather than in arguing or trying to derail the discussion. This strategy sounds very much like the familiar sales strategy of "assuming the sale" – the strategy where a salesperson will treat a potential customer as though she's already made up her mind to buy a product. The potential customer's questions and comments will be treated as requests for information about which product is better suited to her needs, or which product is in her budget – things like this. This strategy can make a person feel like she's on the salesperson's team, and like it would be rude not to carry on the conversation, and sometimes it results in a sale where a customer would otherwise never have intended to buy anything.

Folta's strategy is like that here: he invites dialogue, and interprets questions and comments that are somewhat hostile as genuine requests for further information, and as invitations to further dialogue. This would make the atmosphere much more collegial than otherwise. And, as Goodwin notes, it would have the effect of making Folta appear to be very confident in his knowledge of the subject (if he weren't confident, he wouldn't treat everything as a genuine question to be responded to clearly and rationally, right?). And what is likely the best explanation of Folta's confidence is the fact that he really is knowledgeable on the subject, and he really does have the science on his side, and he really isn't trying to pull a fast one. So presuming good faith in the audience seems like a good way to secure a presumption on the part of the audience, to the effect that Folta himself is dealing in good faith.

I only have two more things to say here. Perhaps they're more requests for elaboration than objections. The first is that, going back to what I was suggesting a minute ago, when a researcher receives money from organizations that have vested interests in the results of her research, the appearance of bias looms, and I don't think that getting the audience to accept that you're dealing in good faith goes all the way toward alleviating that worry. A researcher might be dealing in good faith but still be subject to implicit biases in favour of results that would be favourable to her funding organization. Getting the audience to accept that she's dealing in good faith does of course

¹ Perhaps "assuming" is better here, since there isn't a standing presumption or good evidence in favour of a cooperative audience when the topic is controversial? But this is nit-picking.

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go a long way toward making a researcher seem credible and objective – it's crucial not to come across as dishonest or lacking integrity – but I don't think it goes all the way.

The second thing I want to suggest is that, although Folta's strategy sounds effective (I haven't seen him speak, but he sounds effective), it's risky in the hands of someone who's not very practiced at it. For when a speaker re-interprets an audience member's remarks as requests, or "assumes the sale" and takes it for granted that everyone in the audience is all on the same page regarding their fundamental interests and viewpoints, he risks coming across as either condescending or an industry shill, and he risks putting people's hackles up by assuming things about what they desire. Again, when we're talking about retail sales, an experienced salesperson will know just when to make a suggestion, and just how to re-interpret comments or questions, so that the customer will be lead towards a purchase that he might not have intended to make. But in the hands of an inexperienced salesperson, poor attempts at these tactics can be very irritating and off-putting.

So I don't mean to suggest that Folta's strategy is a bad one in the hands of someone skilled like he is; I only want to suggest that for people who are less experienced with public speaking, or who are not very quick on their feet, perhaps a somewhat less effective but much easier strategy would be advisable, such as the strategy that Goodwin mentioned at one point (on p.5 of the draft) of making a point at the beginning of a talk, to only respond to *reasonable*, polite, etc., questions or comments. This strategy is less inviting and inclusive than Folta's, but it establishes that rude or hostile comments won't be addressed, which one hopes would make such comments less likely to be raised. Deploying this strategy well might be less effective than deploying Folta's strategy well, but it's easier, and deploying this strategy well, I suspect, would be more effective than deploying Folta's strategy poorly.