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Knowledge as a Weapon?

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Can knowledge claims be used to attack? Yes. What should be done about it? That depends.

These questions are inspired by Adam Riggio's article "The Dangers of Intellectual Honesty in a World of Lies" (2022). There is quite a bit in his article with which I agree, but also some revealing areas of disagreement.

Agreements

Riggio argues that "too many of our populations are unable to understand this truth" (61), namely that "investigation into real scientific and medical practice may reveal truths that are politically and morally upsetting" (61). To address this serious problem, he says we—SERRC contributors and readers—should be helping to improve people's "basic practical scientific knowledge" and improve people's media literacy "to tell truth from falsehood" (61). This is a tall order but it is certainly worth the effort to help others, and ourselves, become better at the knowledge games that people play, for the purpose of social betterment rather than social befuddlement.

Many commentators and analysts have addressed serious problems in media coverage. Also, many commentators and analysts have proposed solutions. Riggio says that in a rational polis, which he sees as desirable, "properly journalistic sources" (63) would be an important means for people to learn about the world. He argues for education to help people to sift truth from falsehood and for respectful forums on which the search for truth can proceed. These are all worthy aims.

Concerning respectful forums, it is revealing to contrast SERRC, as a forum, with media interviews based on either an antagonistic or subservient questioning style. In media interviews, often the underlying goal is building an audience, either by fostering conflict or kowtowing to favoured voices. In SERRC, there is little of this. Why not? I think one reason is that contributors care about their scholarly reputations and want to show their best sides in style and argumentation. Perhaps, also, most contributors are aware that readers are likely to include many sharp thinkers. Does SERRC satisfy the criteria for fostering a Riggio-style rational polis?

Media Problems

Riggio argues for a rational polis in which journalism would be informative and fair-minded. How to move in this direction is obvious in one sense: those who subscribe to this form of journalism should either contribute to it or become consumers of it. Unfortunately only a few are impelled in these directions. There are structural driving forces that push media in less than ideal directions. Commercial organisations seek to increase profits, and for this appealing to emotions can be highly effective. One example with which I have long experience is the media preference for reporting violence. It is instructive to attend a protest of a thousand people, almost entirely peaceful, and read a news story that highlights a minor scuffle. As journos say, "If it bleeds, it leads." Another example is international reporting of an aeroplane crash but no reporting of traffic accidents that, in total, harm far more people.

In moving towards Riggio's rational polis, continuing education, in classes and beyond, would include learning about biases in media coverage, for example that some wars receive saturation coverage whereas others are almost invisible (Hawkins 2007). How many people know that the deadliest conflict since the end of the Cold War was in the Congo, with millions of people thought to have been killed?

For many years, I pondered the problems associated with different sources of information. It is easy to find critiques of the mass media (e.g., Bennett 2016; Borjesson 2002; Wu 2016). What about scientific papers? There too, biases abound, perhaps especially in biomedical journals where the influence of pharmaceutical company funding looms large (e.g., Angell, 2005; Sismondo, 2018).

I tried to think of a way to offer guidance in this complex and confusing informational environment but always came up against the problem that no single type of source—experts, mass media, scientific publications, schooling, Wikipedia, even personal experience—is always reliable. Eventually, I had an idea. By examining your own learning in an area you know a lot about, you can judge the quality of different information sources. To demonstrate how this process might operate, I tried it myself, using three case studies in a book titled *Truth Tactics* (Martin, 2021a).

The Origin of AIDS

One of the three case studies is the debate on the origin of AIDS, the very topic addressed by Lee Basham (2022) in the article that triggered Riggio's reply. Basham's focus is on the theory that AIDS originated from contaminated polio vaccines used in Africa in the late 1950s. These were oral polio vaccines, so this view is called the OPV theory.

In my chapter in *Truth Tactics* on how I learned about the debate about the origin of AIDS, I examined a range of potential influences on my understanding. Some of them, including governments, advertising, personal experience and social media, had little or no influence. Others had a large influence, including experts, scientific publications and my own mind.

In relation to experts, I noted that I received considerable information and insights from a few individuals. One of them is Edward Hooper, whose book *The River* is the focus of Basham's commentary (Hooper 2000). I noted, "The debate over the origin of AIDS is, in part, a debate about who counts as an expert. Virologists and epidemiologists have much to contribute but, at least if the OPV theory is considered, so do journalists, historians and independent scholars" (98).

I learned a lot from scientific publications, but I also "learned that there was a systematic exclusion of information about the OPV theory in the scientific literature" (98). Concerning news media, some stories were informative but others less so. I said, "Relying on mass media for understanding is risky if you don't have a deep knowledge of the topic" (98).

In relation to my own mind, it's important to be aware of confirmation bias, the tendency to seek information supportive of one's current views and to ignore or discount contrary information. I noted that one way to counter confirmation bias is to seek challenges to your beliefs, and that this was not a problem for me "because there have been sustained attempts

to discredit the OPV theory and to remove it from consideration.” In writing about the debate over the origin of AIDS, I could hardly hide in a filter bubble but rather had to address the different sides in the debate. In any case, my aim was not to support the OPV theory but to examine the scientific community’s response to it.

Reflecting on Learning

In *Truth Tactics*, I also reflected on my learning about two other topics, the effects of nuclear war and the sources of personal talent. These topics were especially revealing because I changed my views. The point of telling about my learning about topics about which I became knowledgeable was not to convince readers about my views but rather to encourage others to reflect on their own learning.

This leads me to a recommendation complementary to Riggio’s. As part of education for navigating a complex and contested information environment, I think it’s valuable for students, indeed anyone, to reflect on a topic about which they know a lot, thinking about different information sources and their strengths and weaknesses.

For young school students, this might seem an impossible task, but often there are topics about which they do know a lot, for example about their own parents. A key source of information about parents is personal observation. They might also look online, especially if their parents engage in social media, for example having a LinkedIn profile or a Facebook page. They can find out what other people say about their parents. And so on. The point of this process is not to reach a definitive conclusion about the topic of reflection but to draw attention to sources of information, including their strengths and weaknesses for understanding the topic. This can generate caution about accepting any particular claim or relying too heavily on a single source of information.

Riggio would like journalism to be a more reliable source of information. That would be nice, but in the interim it can be valuable for media consumers to develop greater insight into the strengths and shortcomings of the media, and for this it is valuable to reflect on topics about which we know a lot.

Weaponising Knowledge?

Riggio talks about “weaponising knowledge.” The metaphor of a weapon refers to knowledge being used as a tool, one deployed like a weapon. Weapons can be for offence or defence or both: think of ballistic missiles and anti-ballistic missiles. Riggio seems to be talking about offensive weapons, ones that hurt people or society. Disinformation, namely information intended to deceive and harm, is an example.

“Weaponising” is a stigmatising label. Can using this label itself represent a form of attack? Might it serve, in some circumstances, to promote fear of the facts and justify censorship?

Based on my own understanding of the debate over the origin of AIDS (e.g., Martin 2010), I can comment about Riggio’s specific concern about knowledge about the origin of AIDS

being used as a weapon. The OPV theory received extensive media coverage on three occasions: after Tom Curtis's 1992 article in *Rolling Stone*, after the 1999 publication of Hooper's book *The River* and during the September 2000 meeting of the Royal Society, which addressed the two main explanations for the origin of AIDS and in practice served as a means of discrediting the OPV theory (Martin 2001). On each of these occasions, there were numerous news reports and commentaries in scientific journals and in the mass media. Yet there was little comment on any of these occasions about the implications of the OPV theory for contemporary vaccinations. If the OPV theory was weaponised against vaccination, as Riggio suggests, it was a remarkably silent and ineffectual weapon.

On the other hand, opponents of the OPV theory on several occasions claimed that the OPV theory was responsible for resistance to vaccination in Africa. These claims lacked evidence (Hooper 2004), but in any case what is significant here is that for the purposes of the search for the origin of AIDS, opponents of the OPV theory were the ones who used knowledge claims as a means of attack.

Riggio writes, "A calamity does not require an origin in such perversely romantic narratives as a conspiracy ensnaring us in the machinations of the corporate pharmaceutical industry" (68). In the vaccination debate, the label "conspiracy theory" is regularly used to attack critics of orthodoxy. I saw this up close during the massive attack on the thesis of one of my PhD students (Martin 2020). Now, when I encounter the label "conspiracy theory," I look to see who or what is being denigrated, silenced or suppressed.

Riggio is quite right to point to the responsibility of scholars to be aware of the way their investigations, ideas, publications and reputations can be used against the interests of the community. However, I would have thought that writing in a scholarly way, presenting a critique of dominant ideas, presents a fairly minor risk in this regard compared to knowledge intended to be misleading or cause damage.

In stalking Osama bin Laden, the CIA used a cover story of running a vaccination programme. This may have been useful for killing the leader of al-Qaeda, but it was a blatant deception that harmed the reputation of vaccination programs (McGirk 2015). Thereafter, who in Pakistan would trust Westerners bearing vaccines? What is the best way to counter this sort of use of knowledge?

Consider the role of scientists and engineers who design weapons systems, methods of torture, and surveillance systems. In principle, their efforts may serve a good cause, if used by good guys against bad guys, but in practice they contribute to toolboxes used by repressive and aggressive governments. Consider the role of psychologists who design social media algorithms to capture users' attention so information technology companies can make a bigger profit (Lanier 2018). Consider the role of the biomedical researchers who run studies of drugs using techniques to cover up adverse effects, so pharmaceutical companies can make large profits at the expense of people's health (Goldacre 2012).

Conclusion

To repeat, Riggio and I agree it would be valuable for more people to acquire skills to understand scientific claims and see through misrepresentations. It is important for people

to have some understanding of the social contexts of knowledge production, including the role of vested interests, psychological biases and the encouragement to acquiesce to authorities. Ideally, people can understand the ways knowledge claims are used in public messaging to serve a range of purposes.

Appendix

In the table, I contrast what I wrote in “A Covid Paradigm?” (Martin 2021b) with Riggio’s (2022) interpretation of and comments on what I wrote. This contrast can be related to useful skills for dealing with knowledge claims.

Text is extracted from Martin (2021b) and Riggio (2022) and used only for illustrative purposes. Readers can consult the original articles to judge for themselves the parallels and assessments in this table. Quoted citations can be found in Martin (2021b).

Martin (2021b)	Riggio (2022)	Useful skill
Research shows that people who exercise have a reduced risk of contracting Covid (Lee et al. 2021; Sallis et al. 2021) ... There are several other non-vaccine avenues for enhancing immunity, including good nutrition, adequate sleep and mindfulness (Davidson et al. 2003; Gamaldo, Shaikh, and McArthur 2012; Katona and Katona-Apte 2008; Walsh et al. 2011). None of these receives much attention compared to vaccines.	His recent piece “A COVID Paradigm?” (2021) uncritically repeats disinformation and lies such as: that COVID is a minor ailment that can be prevented through good exercise and nutrition;	Understanding the difference between probabilities and certainties: saying there is “a reduced risk of contracting Covid” is not equivalent to saying Covid “can be prevented.”
Exercise, nutrition, sleep and mindfulness do not guarantee immunity to Covid.	that healthy people do not get seriously ill from COVID;	Being careful to fairly represent arguments, in other words to avoid setting up a straw argument.
hydroxychloroquine ... ivermectin	horse dewormer, and malaria medications [implicit references to hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin]	Understanding how derogatory labelling can be used to discredit; understanding that doctors regularly prescribe drugs off-label, legally and legitimately.

<p>At the outset of the pandemic, numerous research teams investigated a wide range of vaccine possibilities, and governments and companies supported the effort. In contrast, there has not been the same enormous effort in investigating a wide range of possibilities for prophylaxis and treatment—especially using substances that are cheap and non-toxic, including vitamin D, vitamin C, zinc, ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine.</p>	<p>that vitamins, horse dewormer, and malaria medications are effective COVID treatments.</p>	<p>Understanding that saying a substance has not been sufficiently investigated is not the same as saying it works.</p>
<p>[No mention of Koch]</p>	<p>He closes his arguments repeating rhetoric that reveals just how thoroughly he has been duped by the propaganda of the Koch family of companies.</p>	<p>Understanding that guilt by association is not a valid form of argumentation. In other words, understanding that an argument should not be dismissed simply because it is supported by individuals or groups deemed unsavoury.</p>
<p>The question needs to be asked, why were billions of dollars invested in vaccine research, development and manufacturing but no equivalently funded social research undertaken into other measures to ameliorate damage from the pandemic?</p>	<p>Martin repeats these lies ...</p>	<p>When claiming that something is false, or a lie, it is useful to provide sources.</p>

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