

Book review of “The Chinese virus: killed millions and scientific freedom”

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Peter Gøtzsche continues to be productive. The Danish doctor and researcher is publishing articles and books at a rapid pace. His latest book is about the impact of the pandemic on science. According to Gøtzsche, truth, science, honesty, decency, and respect for human rights were among the first victims of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gøtzsche is in good company. The renowned epidemiologist John Ioannidis, who Gøtzsche quotes, is also convinced and has personally experienced that the pandemic changed science. “Worldwide, billions of people suddenly became interested in and overexcited by science, without any understanding of the scientific method,” wrote Ioannidis.

“Healthy skepticism was not at the forefront of that process. Even the best peer-reviewed journals presented research results with bias and spin during the pandemic. In the media dissemination of scientific discoveries, the emphasis has been on far-reaching extrapolations of the research results, at the expense of focus on the methodology used or the inherent uncertainty of the results.”

Destruction of reputations

During the pandemic, Ioannidis argues, the star rose from “false experts” who rejected evidence-based approaches, such as randomised trials. Some of them even flirted with their disdain for reliable research designs. In fact, during the pandemic, scientific skepticism was cast in a bad light, and scientists were no longer allowed to ask tough questions. Those who did not conform to the dominant narrative faced threats, insults and harassment in the form of cancel culture campaigns on social media, accusatory articles in mainstream media and bestsellers written by zealots.

Defense against the attacks was virtually impossible. Attacked scientists who sent out a statement saw it twisted and distorted in social and mainstream media in a way that of course allowed the attack to continue. Negative and obviously incorrect sentences appeared on Wikipedia pages. “Reputations were systematically devastated and destroyed,” writes Ioannidis, adding that the attacks not only targeted scientists but also their families.

Kamran Abbasi, the new editor-in-chief of the *BMJ*, endorses Ioannidis' analysis. “Disagreeing with someone has become synonymous with insulting someone,” Abbasi writes. “To protest is now to declare war on someone, and to argue is to fight.”

That post-COVID mentality is unscientific, Abbasi said. “Disagreement, protest and argument help us get closer to the truth, and marginalizing them is incompatible with the very essence of science and democracy. This is happening all around us today.”

Gøtzsche continues. Social media has played an undeniable and nefarious role in this cultural return to the Middle Ages. Before the pandemic, we still believed that a democracy should respect

minority views, but thanks in part to intolerant companies such as Facebook, minority views are now struggling.

Big Tech

In an era in which social debate takes place to a large extent on Internet forums such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, the attitude of Big Tech has horrifying implications. Social media, their censorship and Big Tech-facilitated fact-checkers, through their relentless attack on scientists and dissenting citizens, pose a threat to democracy, open society and free scientific debate.

The stance of social media during the pandemic evokes associations with the religious police in Iran, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Chinese Communist Party, and the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's 1984. Social media has grown into monsters in a matter of years, and we still have no idea whether – and if so, how – we can combat them. The moment we let some young adults on Facebook decide what is true or false, we are doomed.

Traditional media

The Silicon Valley tech companies are relatively young, and that is perhaps a mitigating circumstance. The industry has had little time to develop and implement codes of ethics. The traditional media cannot fall back on that excuse. Virtually everyone who works in the mainstream media is aware that asking critical questions and exposing unfairness are the media's most important jobs. However, this did not happen during the pandemic. Everyone lied.

The *New York Times*, *Nature*, *Lancet*, *Science*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Scientific American* and many other once highly regarded media looked away, twisted reality or lied. In his book, Gøtzsche makes no secret of the fact that few writers, journalists and scientists were willing to investigate the conflict of interest between the mainstream mass media, Big Tech, scientific journals, scientists and Chinese interests. There was every reason for such an exercise, but the Western publishers of scientific media adhered to the same censorship guidelines as the Chinese state media during the pandemic. They sacrificed their mission to protect academic freedom for a monetary gain.

The US government did not behave much better during the pandemic. NIH Director Anthony Fauci and President Joe Biden stated in interviews without flinching that people couldn't get infected if they were vaccinated. That means the vaccines would have 100 per cent efficacy, which is patently incorrect. Even the makers of the vaccines have never dared to claim that, in their otherwise rambling studies. However, when a health magazine's fact-checkers checked these statements, the nonsense received a stamp of approval.

Cover up

It is no wonder that under these circumstances, the true origin of the COVID-19 pandemic has been covered up. According to Gøtzsche, this operation is the worst cover-up in the history of medicine. It is inconceivable that from the moment this new disease appeared on the scene, governments and research institutions have not made serious efforts to uncover the chain of events that killed several million people.

Top officials, individuals and organisations with a dual agenda have hijacked the crisis and used it for their own ends. Even *The Lancet*, once the figurehead of medical science, turned to censorship of the worst kind while simultaneously spreading fake news in ways previously unheard of in science.

An important cause of the decline of science was the omertà of the virologists. After all, if the public knew that the virus that killed their loved ones, bankrupted their businesses and deprived them of their freedom, had escaped from a virology lab, it would have an impact on the virologic profession.

Another cause was the lack of professional ethics of most science journalists. Unlike political reporters, they uncritically copied what their sources said.

Inquisition

In science, an open debate is a requirement for arriving at a sound scientific understanding. During the COVID-19 epidemic, the debate was by no means open. There was usually room for only one interpretation and one truth, as if it were a religious dogma. In many ways, the debate over COVID-19 resembles the dark period at the end of the Middle Ages when the Spanish Inquisition hunted heretics.

Just as priests during the Inquisition accused individuals of dissent about religion or heresy, social media's uncrowned kings put the label "anti-vaxxer" on anyone who dared be critical of corona policies and mass vaccinations. Just as the medieval church resisted scientific insights when they contradicted religious doctrines, so editors of scientific journals and the zeitgeist caught up with researchers while refusing to face the facts. Just as medieval universities only taught what the ecclesiastical bureaucracy had approved, most medical journals now only carry the message of the pharmaceutical industry.

It will be clear that under these conditions, which are aimed at forcing a consensus no matter what, science languishes. After all, science is not about consensus. Science is the opposite of consensus. Scientists disagree, and by the grace of that disagreement, science advances. "Without the possibility of an open debate, science simply ceases to exist," the Belgian doctor Jan Vandenbroucke once remarked.

Conflicts of interest

The politicization of science in modern history is not new. Dictators and autocrats are guilty of this. They allow themselves to be glorified in the process, while at the same time they enrich themselves. The prioritization of politics over scientific fairness has left most Chinese medical research unreliable and has allowed a new virus to spread across the world. It is too easy to put the responsibility for this solely on China. The United States is at least complicit.

The politicization of science in the West stems from a blatant conflict of interest between institutions that Western societies expect to defend our interests, and large corporations pursuing their own interests. We tacitly assume that our institutions can act as a counter-force against the powerful companies if necessary, but in reality the companies have infiltrated our institutions to the very core. One example is the World Health Organization, which is quietly funded by Bill Gates, one of the richest and most powerful men in the world.

According to coverage on domestic social media and the tame mainstream media, Gates' generous donations are an altruistic gesture. Nevertheless, manifestations of philanthrocapitalism like this threaten the independence of our institutions, and ultimately our democracy. Corporate power is growing at the expense of public sector organizations.

This process explains the developments within Big Tech. The owners of the major social media outlets derive their revenue from advertising and are therefore extremely sensitive to Big Pharma's financial enticement tactics. Gøtzsche is convinced that the pharmaceutical industry is making good use of the opportunities offered by companies such as Facebook. These companies are sabotaging communication between people, convincing users of the immense dangers of COVID-19.

The end of the *trias politica*

When Big Tech took on this role and began to censor the interaction between the users of their technology, the boards of large Internet companies turned into unelected rulers. When it comes to our freedom of expression, they are now the legislators, the moral police, and the judges. As a result, the division of power into three independent bodies, with which democratic countries managed to prevent serious forms of abuse of power for several centuries, has therefore disappeared. The *trias politica* conceptualized by the Enlightenment philosopher Montesquieu, the division between the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, is no more.

The successful infiltration of business into our institutions explains why sewer tactics to silence eminent scientific voices suddenly proved successful. It explains why the absurd accusation that opponents of the lockdowns had blood on their hands went unanswered and could result in the loss of university positions. It explains why individuals who played a key role in the origins of the corona pandemic, Peter Daszak from the United States and Shi Zhengli from Wuhan, could lie with impunity.

Individuals who disagreed or asked questions faced censorship, insult and ridicule, especially on social media but also in scientific publications. Peter Gøtzsche has seen many abuses throughout his 35-year career as a scientist, but he could never have imagined that he would see the public and scientific debate descend to such a level of stupidity, primitiveness and mendacity.

Every parliamentarian in a country with a functioning democracy should read Gøtzsche's book. It is called "The Chinese virus: killed millions and scientific freedom" and can be ordered via the website of the Institute for Scientific Freedom.

Note added by Gøtzsche: This is about to change. In the near future, the book will be published by Publishing Services BV in English and Dutch, and by Alphanumera in English and Bengali.