

Ben Smith
Editor in Chief
Buzzfeed

Dear Mr. Smith:

I am writing to you today prompted in part by your editorial in last week's NYT. The decision to publish the Russian Dossier, which seems to have involved a mix of salacious unsubstantiated rumors and what may be potentially important kernels of truth may in the end be defensible, depending on the progress of serious investigations into the 2016 election campaign.

Your editorial hit home because of the experiences I have had over the past six months with reporters from your magazine, who, prompted by what turned out to be a false claim against me, have nevertheless continued to harass associates, friends, loved ones, and colleagues in an attempt to establish a narrative which has continued to not be supported by facts. Even as I, or others, have provided evidence to falsify claims, your reporters have not been content to let facts govern their conclusions. Having decided that I must be guilty at some level of harassment they keep provoking friends, colleagues, and family members with false claims, hoping to generate some substantiation for their hypothesis. Each time I assume the matter is closed, I learn of yet another call laced with misleading innuendo, or another request for information designed to impugn my University and the program I run there.

The specific timing of this letter was prompted by a call I received from my executive assistant shortly after disembarking from a plane with my family returning home from a long trip. She was flustered and upset. Buzzfeed had sent a Facebook friend request to her the previous evening (presumably to gain access to her page in case there was defamatory information on it about me.. There isn't.). Then she received a cold call from one of your reporters, claiming an imminent story to appear about me, telling her they had information that I had not shown support for her maternity leave in 2013 and the need to use her breast pump at work following her return. She responded that this was not the case, and she pointed out she went on a subsequent maternity leave again later, and that I had supported her in this, as in all other family matters. We treat each other with respect, and trust, as I try and do with all colleagues, students, and fans from the general public. The reporter followed up with the same unsubstantiated claim that other friends and colleagues have heard from your team: Why would 'so many people' make claims about me if they weren't true? My assistant answered that she did not know of any such claims, but added that in the 9 years she has worked for me she would have ample opportunity to observe harassment, if it had occurred, and she hadn't.

My employees, colleagues, friends, and family, should not have to be harassed by embarrassing questions about their personal lives in an effort to defame or discredit me, and this last episode has prompted me to act. A representative of my University has expressed to me their view that, even as your reporters have repeatedly failed to find credible allegations in their correspondence with them (and me), they will keep pestering

the University and others with new requests for information in an effort to justify the time they have thus far spent trying to defend a conclusion they decided upon before embarking upon their investigation, and will not be dissuaded by evidence to the contrary. Thus, while my original inclination was to let the matter die on its own, this seems increasingly unlikely.

Online rumors about me began shortly after I publicly refused to further demonize a friend of mine, Jeffrey Epstein, who had been accused in the media of a host of sexual improprieties, and who was later convicted (without trial) of obtaining paid massages from some women who turned out to be under 18. While not defending any behavior, I pointed out that a number of the outrageous allegations swirling in the internet against Jeffrey were patently false, that I personally had not witnessed any behavior that would have supported the original claim or any other, and moreover I would not minimize the friendship I had had with Jeffrey, or disavow that friendship, because he had gone to jail for that offense.

The response of course was that I too must be a 'sexual predator'. Indeed, my friend Penn Jillette told me that before he first met me he was warned against it because I was a sexual predator. When he asked why, he was told it was because of I was friend of Jeffrey's.

The first rumor I saw on the internet was that Stephen Hawking and I had had orgies on an island of Jeffrey's. Following that ridiculous piece, I tended to ignore claims that were brought to my attention that periodically appeared online alleging, through innuendo, that I was a harasser. On one occasion, when a story impugned my wife, I responded warning the individual in question of spreading defamatory stories about her, and it was removed.

Your reporters, while probably initially prompted by the false and rather ridiculous third-party claim about a selfie in Australia in 2016, picked up on this internet trash and started their investigation. They informed me in Dec that a story was about to appear about me, alleging a pattern of harassment. While a little serious and skeptical research on their part could have demonstrated that the claims that could be verified were in fact false, I responded to them with evidence that caused them to pull their story.

What surprised me at the time was the disingenuous nature of their investigation, and the way they framed their conclusions. For example, in one of their repeated information requests from my University they asked for a report on all claims of sexual harassment by me reported to the University. The University responded by saying that there were no such claims at the University but there were two outside claims associated with events outside the University received that they subsequently found to be unsubstantiated and defamatory, and hence would not provide details about. (One of these was the false claim that I believed triggered the BuzzFeed story, and about which two Universities I am associated with investigated and subsequently dismissed). When BuzzFeed sent me the details of their forthcoming story this was not reported. All that was claimed was that BuzzFeed had contacted my University for information about sexual harassment claims against me and the University had refused to provide information.

Similarly, your reporters appeared to repeatedly mis-represent the nature of their story as they communicated with different individuals. To the University they indicated they were interested in how Universities responded to claims of sexual harassment. To another individual they wrote claiming they were interested in how a prominent atheist organization might be shielding prominent atheists like me. Lastly, in an effort to force individuals to impugn me they followed up their questions by indicating that 'many' other individuals had done so, and asked why they all might be lying?

They even asked me about this during the period between the time they sent me the draft material they planned to publish and the time the story got pulled. I explained to them that I have a history of addressing controversial issues and that this provokes sometimes rather vicious responses, and that there are various groups that are intent on claiming, among other things, that the atheist community is dominated by prominent male misogynists and harassers. Some people then propagate unfounded rumors, and other, more well-meaning individuals then begin to second guess their own experiences, sometimes even their experiences coming on to me. Indeed, as the subsequent investigation of one of their claims demonstrated, someone who claimed harassment had in fact overtly made overtures to me (in front of others thankfully, who were able to validate my own experience) which I had rebuffed, and then later claimed harassment. One might have thought that the fact that the allegations that formed much of the core of their story were shown to be false lent more credibility to this suggestion than the a priori conclusion that kept driving their story.

As I understood it, the thrust of their story was that, as a supposedly prominent academic and public figure (I guess I should be flattered by the effusive way they tried to build me up in their story) my University and other organizations with which I am associated felt it necessary to protect or shield me from potential embarrassment. In fact, of course, quite the opposite is the case. As my University informed me when I first objected to them taking seriously an unsubstantiated third-party claim about a private event in Australia which had nothing to do with the University, it precisely because I am a well-known individual with a public persona, that everywhere I go, and everything I do, therefore is viewed as reflecting on my affiliation University and hence is subject to investigation—something that would not be the case for a more standard faculty member. Furthermore when I asked University attorneys about my rights regarding any lawsuit I might initiate, against BuzzFeed, for example, I was informed that because I am to some extent a public figure I would have to show malicious intent as well as defamation—something that the history of my experience with your reporters might actually support.

What is particularly galling about the allegations is that I take particular pride in the way I try and treat friends, employees, students, and members of the general public, and I take quite seriously the privilege I have to reach a broad audience. I recognize, for example, that people who come up to me with questions, or who ask for autographs or selfies, are extremely vulnerable. They could feel humiliated if rebuffed, dismissed, or treated with revision. I go out of my way to make people feel comfortable and respected, and as far as I can tell, the people I interact with in this case appreciate it. I believe your reporters who I later learned surreptitiously followed me to an event in Las Vegas will have witnessed that.

Moreover, far from being shielded, both Universities I was affiliated with at the time received the third-party claim of the event in Australia, and both launched investigations. In Australia, I was informed that I was not allowed on campus or to meet with students while the claim was being investigated, and it took over a month before that process was completed and the suspension was lifted. In my case it was onerous since I no longer spent time at that campus, but had I had a laboratory or students I was working with there, it could have been quite damaging to my research. After the fact, this somewhat extreme action was made even more questionable, as the final report of the University indicated that even the original claim against me was without any direct evidence.

In this regard, I take particular umbrage with the effort of your reporters to impugn these Universities, and also it seems, the Origins Project, which I run at ASU. That program, which runs transdisciplinary workshops for prominent scholars on foundational questions ranging from the origin of the Universe, to human origins, xenophobia, and beyond, and which then has public programs helping to inform and excite hundreds of thousands of members of the public about scientific developments at the forefront of modern research, is one of my proudest accomplishments. It is the reason I moved to ASU, and it is one of the hallmarks of that institution that it supports such an entrepreneurial scholarly activity. Yet your reporters have continually tried to impugn it by requesting information on the program, with the clear intent to suggest insidious goals, or perhaps that in an effort to please donors the University is willing to look the other way regarding matters related to me.

Besides the harassment of the past six months, which has affected not only my own work, and has upset family and friends, I am bothered by the fact that this investigation was apparently launched by 'science-reporters' at BuzzFeed. I wasn't aware of such a group at your organization until they contacted me, and as far as I can see, there is little or no science actually reported by you. The reporters in question, Peter Aldhous and Virginia Hughes, seem once to have been actual science researchers and journalists who once wrote for reputable science journals before their science journalism careers seemed to end and they eventually joined BuzzFeed. Now they seem to have descended to a level of disingenuousness and lack of journalist integrity that is an insult to that past experience.

In science, as Richard Feynman once said, one has a hypothesis and one should try and work just as hard to prove it wrong as prove it right. If evidence contradicts the hypothesis one should skeptically re-examine it. And all those who have been involved in research have experienced the disappointment of spending considerable time on a project only to find that it doesn't work out as expected. Reputable scientists then move on, often learning from the experience to motivate new research, and sometimes, if it is useful, reporting on their negative results. It is instead the hallmark of religion or ideology to decide in advance on what the answers are, before you begin to ask questions. Holding to the truth of an assertion and discounting all contradictory facts, cherry picking only that data that might support the conclusion is the hallmark of junk science, and yellow journalism.

It seems a pity that formerly credible science journalists have been reduced to muckraking hacks. If your publication wants to be known for investigative journalism, and if it has a science unit, why not investigate the stories behind science? There are fascinating stories that could humanize science, and increase the public's interest and knowledge instead of feeding a public interest in salacious gossip.

I have been in the situation now for some time of waiting for whatever defamatory story your reporters rig up to appear. I had thought that after my experience in December that this too might have passed, but my assistant's experience, and the facts that a postdoc informed me just yesterday that Hughes tried to friend him on facebook, and the fact that my University has informed me of yet another request for information related to the project I run at ASU has been made by Aldous suggests that they are continuing to dig for anything they can find that might justify some defamatory story, even if it might mean publishing the fact that I might have been rude to my 4th grade teacher. It has been six months since I was contacted by my University about the first false allegation and during which I, my University, my family, friends, employees, students, and colleagues have been harassed by this continuous barrage.

With this letter, I am asking you to halt this harassment and the effort to defame not just me, but the honorable organizations that I am a part of, and the Origins Project at ASU that I am particularly proud of running. I had hoped that the harassment and infringement on our time, peace and wellbeing would end without any public statement, but I am realistic enough to know that hopes, and reality, often don't coincide.

Shame on you.

Lawrence M. Krauss