

My Story About the BuzzFeed Article.

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The period since a slanderous BuzzFeed story appeared defaming me, and by association the skeptical and atheist community in general, has been one of the most difficult of my life. To those friends, colleagues, and strangers, who have written me kind notes of support, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. To those who have expressed anger and betrayal, I understand the disappointment you must have experienced upon reading the story. It has been very hard to sit back and remain silent thus far as my own integrity, and the integrity of the skeptical community, has been impugned. And while it has gone against every grain of my nature to not immediately strike out forcefully in writing and in speeches against falsehoods and distortions imposed upon the public, I have been advised by many individuals wiser and more experienced than me in these matters to not lash out immediately, but to wait till calmer heads, including my own, prevailed.

What many of you do not know is that this past week has not been the beginning of this story for family, my colleagues, my friends, and me. For over six months, following a third party complaint submitted to two Universities with which I have been affiliated over the past few years, a complaint that both Universities investigated and dismissed, we have been harassed by reporters from BuzzFeed who have confronted me and others with one false allegation after another, including ancient discredited internet gossip. In turn they either demanded counter-evidence which then was provided, or they slandered me to others by pre-emptively using these claims to insinuate that I was a serial sexual harasser. At one point in December, BuzzFeed announced to me and my University that they were publishing a story the next day, which, among other things, misrepresented information my own University had provided them with. Only after they were provided with counter-evidence to their claims at the time did they pull the piece from publication at that time.

It nevertheless became clear that there was an agenda here. Others had warned me that they would reframe the allegations that I was perhaps foolhardy enough to provide counter-evidence against, in a way that would nevertheless appear to be damning by innuendo. I had had the naïve belief that this counter-evidence might matter as it always has in discussions of science or public policy with professional reporters I have been privileged to work with over the years. Slowly the constant barrage of emails made it clear that BuzzFeed had decided that the skeptical and atheist movement was male dominated, sexist, harassing, and xenophobic. In the process of their email barrage, I was asked to comment on these issues, why I or others might be Islamophobic, how would I have the temerity to suggest that the movement was becoming more diverse etc.. I could only speculate at the time about connections the reporters might have to the sources they quoted, even as numerous others since the report has appeared have alluded to such connections.

At one point a few weeks ago, after they harassed my executive assistant (more on that in a bit) at the workplace, and after that they submitted new allegations they said were from anonymous former employees that impugned The Origins Project which I am privileged to lead at ASU—allegations of complaints that had never been relayed to me, their supervisors, or the University—I finally contacted an attorney, who issued a cease and desist order on Wed of last week. I don't think it is a coincidence that the next day the story they had cobbled together up to that point appeared.

I do not intend to counter their slanderous allegations point by point. It first became clear that any story they might write would be disingenuous early on, when, after repeatedly badgering my University for a statement about any claims of sexual harassment against me, the University responded that there had been no such claims against me at the University by any students, staff, or faculty. When BuzzFeed asked for details of the external claim from Australia that they later published, the University informed them that claim had been deemed to be defamatory and had been dismissed, and they don't release information on such claims. Following that, in a letter BuzzFeed sent in December that was to form the basis of the story they said they would publish the next day, they simply stated that the University "denied a request from BuzzFeed News for documents relating to complaints of sexual harassment", omitting the part about there never being sexual harassment claims at the University. Once I saw the way they twisted the truth in December, I knew to expect the worst.

Counter-evidence provided to BuzzFeed from individuals and Institutions was ignored. The third-party allegation about touching someone's breast during a line of selfie-request line at a banquet, which seems to have initiated the whole reporting effort, was investigated by ANU. They found that several key aspects of the original third party claim were directly contradicted during their investigation, and others could not be substantiated, leading to its dismissal. These discrepant facts were later forwarded to BuzzFeed, but they never made it into their story about me. Since its publication, I have learned of a similar situation regarding the first allegation made in the BuzzFeed story. BuzzFeed had contacted an individual directly familiar with the events in question, and that individual in a letter to BuzzFeed provided information that was more consistent with my description of the facts than with those that made it into the story, but BuzzFeed chose not to publish any of that counter-evidence when making their claim. In another instance, after BuzzFeed alleged that they had someone willing to go on record claiming that I was forcibly removed from an institution after an event and banned from returning, I informed them that I had a host of evidence that this was not the case. As one example, I later forwarded to them a copy of an email from the Director of the Institution, sent a year after the event, thanking me for my contribution at the event and saying he was looking forward to my return. Instead of accepting that their source had lied and thus was not credible, they simply accepted a new statement that was sufficiently vague as to be untestable.

(while still untrue), but nevertheless was, by innuendo effectively slanderous. To be clear: I have not been banned, quietly or otherwise, from Institutions that I have been associated with. Even the rather difficult Dean at CWRU (since he became dean I and 6 other faculty out of a total of slightly more than 20 faculty in the physics department have left CWRU for other more attractive institutions) who encouraged the young woman to make the complaint that CWRU—which at the time was way ahead of the curve on sexual harassment issues, but in spite of this decided this complaint did not warrant being treated as a sexual harassment complaint and the issue was concluded informally—nevertheless made me a very attractive counter-offer to keep me at CWRU, and both he and the University President made it clear that should I want to return after spending time at ASU, I would be welcomed back. I returned with his awareness not only to give a lecture there a year later, but several times to interact with colleagues in my former department. Lastly, after dredging up an old internet claim about my behavior on a cruise, where I and “an unidentified female companion” were alleged to have propositioned a third woman, who declined the invitation, I informed Buzzfeed, as I had earlier informed the internet accusers, that that unidentified woman was in fact my wife, who didn’t appreciate the false allegation, and denied it. Buzzfeed then had the temerity to check this assertion with my wife, but that didn’t stop them from publishing the allegation anyway. And they didn’t mention that one of the apparent corroborating claimants, who knew full well who I was with at the time because he befriended us on the cruise, had become the boyfriend of one of the individuals mentioned in their story who has a long history of making complaints about CFI and essentially all well-known men in the skeptical community. So went it for their other Buzzfeed allegations and counter-evidence for those things that were not merely hearsay, and thus effectively unfalsifiable.

Three specific false allegations made by the reporters in the Buzzfeed story that don’t relate to listed complainants are particularly galling to me, not because they are the most shocking or salacious, but because they are disgustingly out of line to anyone who knows me, my actions, and my philosophy.

1. It is alleged that I stated that maternity leave for women is unfair. I grew up in Canada, and lived also in Australia with my wife. Both countries actually have maternity leave policies that are sensible, unlike those in the United States. My executive assistant, who in fact took two leaves while she has worked for me, can attest that I was shocked when I found that she was provided only six weeks paid leave. In other more sensible countries, paid maternity or paternity leave is provided for far longer. I have often spoken about the need for more support for health and human services for women and men in this regard in the US, not less. It is disgusting to me that they would suggest otherwise. Related to this, as I mentioned earlier, my executive assistant called me one day on the verge of tears as one of the Buzzfeed reporters had called her at work, without notice, alleging that someone had said in 2013 that I had not supported her maternity leave or her later breast pumping in the office, and once again repeated unsubstantiated allegations that many women had claimed I was an harasser. My assistant informed them that this was not the case, and that she had taken a subsequent maternity leave, and moreover, in the 9 years she has worked for me has never observed of or been aware of any behavior along the lines they described.
2. Apparently my statements that the skeptical movement was becoming more diverse, and that it was a good time to be a woman in science were taken to represent my misogynistic and sexist delusions. In fact, all you have to do is go to any conference and you will see that the programs have become far more diverse, something I have long been a supporter of. And throughout my career I have experienced and been part of concerted efforts to help make physics more diverse. When I was chair of physics, we not only hired the first women faculty in physics, we also matriculated what was probably the first all-female entering graduate physics class. In fact, it *is* a good time to be a woman in science, and I have pointed this out frequently when I lecture precisely because I believe this helps encourage young women who hear it to consider a career in science. Claiming that the whole discipline is anti-women merely serves to perpetuate the status quo, and defeat the purpose of those who claim they are trying to help.
3. Finally to return to the claim about the event in Australia which started the whole mess. Taken on face value it is ridiculous. This was a banquet for donors, attended largely by coupled partners. I showed up at the request of the organizers, and agreed to sign books and do selfies before dinner, and actually left before dinner because I was hungry and the cocktail session went on so long. In any case, even if I had had an urgent desire to touch someone’s breast I would have been a complete fool to choose to do that during a session when selfies were being taken and moreover when partners had been in attendance, and moreover when the donors to the organization that was hosting the conference that supported me were there. (One of the claimed bits of evidence described to ANU by the claimant was that there was an actual photo of me touching someone’s breast. Even after repeated requests by the University, no such photo could be produced). Beyond this, however, this claim strikes at the heart of who I am and who I try to be. People who come up to me asking for selfies or autographs are vulnerable. They are often shy, sometimes shaking, sometimes crying. I go out of my way to make them feel welcome and respected at a time when they could otherwise feel humiliated. I believe my friends and colleagues who have witnessed this and any of the perhaps 5000-10,000 people who had taken such selfies can attest that I try and make people feel comfortable and at ease. And while I have sometimes been groped or kissed (by various genders) during the process, I treat even these people gently and kindly and try not to embarrass them in public.

I am by nature friendly and informal, even in formal circumstances. This has most often held me in good stead, because it can create the atmosphere of safe, open and respectful communication that I want to engender. Nevertheless, that style has

sometimes backfired against me, when I have been in subordinate positions and my informal approach was viewed badly. More important, it has clearly made some other people uncomfortable, perhaps because it is unexpected, or seems inappropriate in formal settings or is otherwise misinterpreted. In this regard I have undoubtedly uttered what seem like aphorisms or jokes on occasions where other have found them to be inappropriate. I apologize to those who have been made to feel uncomfortable by this, and who also may have felt they couldn't let me know. With every passing year I have learned to try and rein in my urge to always make a joke. I urge those who may interact with me in the future to let me know if my remarks to them make them feel uncomfortable or seem inappropriate, and of course will continue to try and ensure that that doesn't happen, and encourage them to feel free to respond.

I am also brash and outspoken, sometimes obnoxious, in public and private, and I realize that this is not always appropriate. I have tried to create an atmosphere where people can talk freely to me, whether they are staff, students, or members of the general public. If there have been times when my statements may have made people feel uncomfortable, but at the same time they didn't feel they could voice their concerns, I am truly sorry. That has never been my intent. I nevertheless know I can be obnoxious and perhaps intimidating at times.

More generally, I have always tried to encourage open discourse in my interactions with family, friends, colleagues, students, and members of the public. I realize my own comfort zone for such frank discussion is likely far broader than others. If this has ever made anyone feel uncomfortable in a way in which they did not feel they could talk to me about, I also apologize.

Finally, I have flirted with women during social occasions when it seemed reciprocal, though I did not flirt with students such as the young woman described in the article. While this has seemed innocent enough, and I believe it often is, the many stories I been reading of late where it has caused unexpected discomfort among men and women have produced an evolving sensitivity in this regard, as I expect it has for many people right now. I unabashedly apologize if these interactions unwittingly caused any pain or discomfort. My intentions have never been to demean anyone, objectify them, or diminish their sense of self-worth, or their ability to respond in a way they felt was appropriate. I have also had promiscuous periods at various times in my life. But there again, my relationships were always respectful and consensual.

I want to make it quite clear: I have never assaulted or sexually harassed anyone, and no institution I have ever been a part of has accused me of, or found me to be in violation of, sexual harassment regulations.

In the current climate I recognize it is virtually impossible to undo the impact of mere allegations, true or false, once they have been made public. I have tried to clarify here why the allegations described by BuzzFeed are not credible. Skepticism is important, of course, and I expect some have already made up their minds on the basis of the story they read and will be skeptical of this statement. But I hope I have given here cause for skepticism about that reporting, and I hope I have honestly and accurately conveyed why I have found BuzzFeed's efforts slanderous, harassing, disingenuous and without integrity. I say this while at the same time recognizing the need for me to assess more carefully the way I interact with those around me in order to achieve the goals I really want: honest, open, frank, fun, and respectful communication. And I recognize that my language and attitude have unintentionally made some people uncomfortable enough to voice their discomfort to others, if not to me. And I regret that deeply, and certainly will continue to moderate any behavior that might induce that, and continue to encourage those around me to be free to express their feelings and emotions.

I do not know to what extent my own efforts will be permanently damaged by this experience, especially in light of the current climate. But I am determined to try to continue my work, and wherever my positive impacts, to the best of my ability. Along with my colleagues I will continue to try and defend science and reason against attacks emanating from those with any ideological or religious agenda. I will continue to try and reach out to young people and old alike, to help excite them about the Universe in which we live, and to encourage them to think critically about it. I will continue to try and do an ever better job to interact with others, regardless of their age, gender, or professional stature, in a friendly and respectful way that will continue to allow for open and safe communication, with warmth and mutual respect. I have already expressed my regrets to those for whom my remarks may have caused personal pain, and who have felt they weren't able to talk to me about it. I am also sorry to those who felt betrayed by what they have read, but I also urge you to also think critically about the context in which it was written, and the integrity of those who have written it.