

PUBLICISING SUPPRESSION

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Publicity is one of the most powerful avenues for opposing suppression of intellectual dissent. Suppression usually takes the form of blocking publications or free speech, or of victimising those who hold the dissenting views, such as by harassment, smear campaigns and sackings. Publicity is an immediate challenge to suppression in two ways. First, it exposes or threatens to expose the suppressed views themselves. Second, it threatens to mobilise opposition to the practices, policies or power of the groups instituting the suppression.

There are some specific examples which suggest that publicity does help. Soviet dissidents have reported that when foreign publicity exposes their mistreatment, conditions usually improve. In the case of Zhores Medvedev the pressure of outside publicity assisted in effecting his release from a mental institution.¹ Andrei Sakharov has written of the helpfulness of publicity in countering secret repression within the USSR — although he has also warned that inaccuracies in the publicity, as in the overly zealous anti-communist propaganda published in *Nature*, “almost cancelled its usefulness”.²

Amnesty International has used the method of writing letters to the authorities in countries where political prisoners are held. This seemingly innocuous approach has achieved the release of thousands of prisoners, among other successes. Amnesty also recommends attempting to communicate with gaoled dissidents to let them know that there is someone on the outside who cares.

In this chapter we address a specific question about obtaining publicity for dissidents. Where is coverage of suppression of intellectual dissent more likely to be obtained: in scholarly journals or in the mass media? We obtained an answer to this question from an unplanned experiment in trying to publicise a case of suppression treated earlier in this book, the dismissal of Dr John Coulter from the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science.

When news of Dr Coulter’s impending dismissal became known in April 1980, many people rallied to his defence. It seemed apparent that Dr Coulter was being victimised for his environmental activities: a case of suppression of a dissident scientist. The official justifications for the dismissal did not stand up at the time, as correspondence in the *Adelaide Advertiser* showed, nor later during the court hearings. Dr Coulter was supported by scientists, environmentalists, trade unionists and others who wrote letters to newspapers and parliamentarians, passed resolutions and published information about the case.

We were two of those who tried to publicise the Coulter case. Since each of us had been concerned about suppression of scientists for some time, we also tried to place the Coulter case in the context of suppression generally and in the context of the system of power relationships within science and the wider society.

In the course of writing and submitting letters and articles about the Coulter case and about suppression in science, we carried out an unplanned experiment in determining the

receptiveness of different types of journals to information about suppression. A summary of the responses to our efforts is presented in the table below. Details, qualifications and further comments are given elsewhere.³

TABLE

Fate of submissions by Brian Martin or by Clyde Manwell about the Coulter case or about suppression generally, to various journals.

Technical, scientific and medical journals

British Medical Journal: letter submitted July 1980, rejected July 1980.
Medical Journal of Australia: letter submitted July 1981, rejected September 1981.
Nature: letter submitted July 1980, revised version of letter not published.
New Scientist: article submitted September 1980, rejected October 1980.
Science: article submitted April 1980, returned May 1980; letter submitted May 1980, published September 1980.
Search: article submitted March 1981, rejected April 1981; letter submitted May 1981, published April/May 1982.

Journals treating social issues

Arena: article submitted May 1981, rejected November 1981.
ANU Reporter: article submitted May 1980, revised version published August 1980.
Bogong: solicited article submitted September 1980, published September/October 1980.
Crime and Social Justice: solicited article submitted September 1982, published mid-1983.
Current Affairs Bulletin: article submitted February 1982, declined March 1982.
Ecologist: letter submitted July 1980, accepted July 1980 but not published; article submitted October 1980, published January/February 1981; letter submitted August 1982, not published.
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia: article submitted May 1980, revised version published December 1980.
Metal Worker: article submitted February 1981, published March 1981.
New Doctor: letter submitted September 1981, not published.
New Society: article submitted February 1981, rejected March 1981.
Probe: article provided August 1981, published October 1981.
Progressive: article submitted November 1980, story published February 1981.
Science for the People: information submitted February 1981, nothing published.
Social Studies of Science: article submitted May 1980, declined July 1980.
Waikato Environment: solicited article submitted March 1981, rejected April 1981.

Newspapers and television and radio stations

Adelaide Advertiser: article submitted April 1980, not published.
Melbourne Age: unsolicited interview July 1980, article published July 1980.
Australian: information requested September 1980, article published September 1980.
Australian Broadcasting Corporation, radio and television: several interviews in 1980, broadcast in the following weeks.
Canberra Times: letter submitted May 1980, published June 1980; talk given September 1980, article on talk published September 1980.

Capital 7 Television: unsolicited interview September 1980, broadcast September 1980.

National Times: information provided October 1980, nothing published.

We have grouped the journals into three categories. First are technical, scientific and medical journals. By and large these journals were uninterested in or hostile towards publishing material on the Coulter case and suppression. Partial exceptions were *Science* and *Search*, where letters were published after considerable delay and some persistence on our part, and *New Scientist*, which solicited (but did not receive or publish) an article after rejecting a submission from one of us.

The second category includes a diverse collection of journals which can be said to treat social issues. The response from these journals to our submissions was quite mixed, seeming to depend considerably on the particular editors involved. Of left-leaning journals, *Arena*, *New Society* and *Science for the People* were not interested in our material, but *Crime and Social Justice* and the *Progressive* were quite receptive. Of environmental journals, *Bogong* and *Probe* quickly published articles, the *Ecologist* was interested but did not publish all our submissions, and *Waikato Environment* was not interested. The two journals closest to the professional orientation of journals in the first category, namely *New Doctor* and *Social Studies of Science*, were similarly hesitant to publish our submissions.

The third category includes newspapers and television and radio stations: the so-called mass media. By and large these outlets were quite interested in the Coulter case and in suppression generally, more even than the table suggests. Although the Adelaide *Advertiser* did not publish an article written by one of us, it did publish many letters and an article about the Coulter case. Likewise, while the *National Times* did not use the material provided by one of us about a variety of cases of suppression, earlier it did publish one of the most substantial articles on the Coulter case. Many reporters requested information or interviews with us; we have not listed in the table the many radio stations which requested and recorded interviews about suppression.

The contrast between the first and third categories is considerable. On the one hand, editors and referees for prestigious scientific and medical journals tended to be sceptical of the existence of suppression and wary of making comment. On the other hand, reporters for newspapers and the electronic media were ready and sometimes eager to publicise stories on suppression. Journals intermediate in scientific status were also on average intermediate in receptiveness to material on suppression.

How can the differences in receptiveness to material on suppression be explained? One possible explanation is that scholarly journals have higher standards of verification. This does not stand up to examination. When we submitted material to scientific journals, we also sent supporting evidence, including newspaper accounts and internal memos. Rejections of our accounts were not claimed to be based on lack of evidence. Sometimes no reasons were offered, sometimes the editors were not convinced of our explanations, but in only two cases did they request further information. Furthermore, in every case we personally were taking responsibility for accuracy by offering letters or signed articles.

Inaccuracy in scientific journals is more common than is usually recognised. It is telling that the exposure of fraud in science, as in the case of Sir Cyril Burt, often has taken place in the mass media rather than in the scientific journals that published the fakes in the first place.

While examples of inaccuracies in the mass media abound, the mass media must be very careful in reporting cases dealing with individuals. The laws on defamation — which are quite severe in Australia — provide a source of feedback on accuracy in reporting cases such as the Coulter case. Not only would it be much easier to sue a local newspaper or television station than an overseas scientific journal, it would be more lucrative.

In summary, scientific journals are not as concerned about high standards of verification of suppression as might be expected, whereas the mass media are forced by defamation law to be very careful in these cases.

Nor can differences in responses to information about suppression readily be explained by differences in types of articles published in journals. Most of the scientific and medical journals to which we sent letters and articles normally include some articles or editorials on ethical issues. Several of these journals routinely publish material about suppression of scientists in communist countries. The few reasons offered to us for not publicising the Coulter case — that it was only of local interest, or that it might be solely a personality clash — do not sit well with the willingness to expose victimisation of dissident scientists in communist countries.

In our opinion, the differences in response to information about suppression are largely due to the role of many scientists, especially influential editors and referees, in sanctioning or not protesting against suppression close to home, compared to the important if occasional role of the mass media in exposing various abuses in society. Many scientists have submerged their own dissent or qualms — or even tolerated or used the suppression of others — in order to obtain degrees, jobs and research grants. In these circumstances the way to avoid guilt and cognitive dissonance is to deny that suppression occurs at all.

More importantly, exposure of suppression is a threat to the power and prestige of scientific elites. For example, Dr Coulter in his public statements cast doubt on the safety of certain environmental chemicals. This provided a direct threat to the profits of companies and an indirect threat to the funding and status of scientists and scientific institutions patronised by the chemical corporations. Is it any wonder that chemical corporations forwarded complaints to the IMVS, and that influential figures in the IMVS were upset by Dr Coulter's activities?

Historically, the press became a business in itself in the mid-1800s by selling itself via catastrophes, scandals, crime and war: bad news in moral terms became good news in commercial terms. Once news became a commodity rather than just information, the press was able to become partially detached from the political and economic bases of capitalism and parliamentary democracy. As a semi-autonomous force in society, the press on occasion is able to publicise or even support movements or activities, such as the labour movement, which are antagonistic to dominant groups. Journalists, editors and proprietors do not have a great stake in protecting the image of science and academia. Some pressures in this direction exist, but contrary pressures exist to publish anything that makes a good story — and suppression fits this bill well.

Would better national and overseas publicity have made a difference in the outcome of the Coulter case? It is impossible to know for sure, but we strongly suspect that extra publicity — especially in scientific journals — might well have encouraged a better and quicker settlement in Dr Coulter's favour.

We conclude that "scholarly standards" are not always sufficient to produce the truth. At least as important is freedom of the press, and more than this the willingness to speak out on controversial issues.

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References

1. Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev, *A Question of Madness* (New York: Norton, 1979).
2. Andrei Sakharov, letter, *Nature*, vol. 288, 13 November 1980, p. 112.
3. Brian Martin and Clyde Manwell, "The fate of suppression submissions" (available from the authors).