



Bad Advice for Scientists

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The widespread belief that conservatives are anti-science owes much to Chris Mooney, the author of the book *The Republican War on Science* (reviewed in these pages; see “Bush-League Science,” Fall 2005). That polemic helped establish the conventional wisdom that the Bush administration hated science, politicians abuse it, the public is indifferent, and the media only cares when it can make a buck.

So it is surprising to find that Mooney and coauthor Sheril Kirshenbaum, in their new book *Unscientific America*, claim that science is suffering largely due to the behavior of scientists themselves. They condemn the arrogance of scientific spokesmen like Richard Dawkins, and their derision of politicians, the media, the public, religion, and the humanities. They also lament the rise of severe scientific specialization, which they say has “made it harder to connect outside the laboratory and the ivory tower.”

These failings have all served to isolate scientists from society. We “have far too many unhealthy dis-

connects between different types of talented, intellectually motivated leaders and thinkers,” Mooney and Kirshenbaum argue, exhorting scientists to follow in the footsteps of Carl Sagan by explaining to the public why science matters.

Laudable though it seems at first, this plea for public responsibility is

lost under layers of jargon from the world of public relations. Mooney and Kirshenbaum write of making

“source-oriented communicators” become “receiver-oriented,” of attaining “ideal synergy,” and of creating “a new caste of savvy scientists who can act as ‘framers’ of policy issues.”

The book’s practical advice for scientists is in the same P.R. vein. The authors encourage scientists to adopt a conciliatory pose, to take courses in writing and communication, to learn how to explain their issues with “media communicability,” and to accept that their advice will be judged not on substance but on “the utility of its packaging.” Scientists should befriend politicians, form political action committees, and even run for political office themselves.

*Unscientific America:
How Scientific Illiteracy Threatens Our Future*
By Chris Mooney and Sheril Kirshenbaum
Basic Books ~ 2009 ~ 209 pp.
\$24 (cloth) \$15 (paper)

Publicly offering such manipulative advice is always unseemly, and in this case, it slides into outright hypocrisy. The book is streaked with the same arrogance that it counsels scientists to avoid. (Scientists, we are told in epigraphs, “have been kicking ass since the Enlightenment” and “should get more money” and “more sex.”) And the authors continue to take potshots at all the old enemies, rehearsing point for point the tired “war on science” narrative laid out in Mooney’s first book.

But given their emphasis on communication, what is worse than the authors’ disrespect for those who question the scientific enterprise is their complete lack of interest in them. Mooney and Kirshenbaum advocate engagement with religious leaders and humanists, but they themselves barely acknowledge the serious questions that each have posed, and make no attempt to answer them.

They note the critiques leveled by environmental, anti-war, and anti-corporate thinkers against science and technology, but without discussing whether such critiques might be justified. They assert that religion and science should be treated as perfectly compatible, but offer no reason beyond expediency (and note that the benighted faithful need instruction in understanding “emerging technologies and ideas, and...integrating them into their worldview”). They even disparage literature as a source of wisdom for understanding science as a human

activity, dismissing *Frankenstein* and *Faust* as stories that perpetuate “ugly scientist stereotypes.”

If the authors were serious in their call for a thoughtful public discussion about the broad scientific enterprise, they would join in the conversation already underway. Instead, they refuse to acknowledge any entity that evinces anything less than unqualified enthusiasm for science and technology—ignoring completely, for instance, the President’s Council on Bioethics, which recently completed nearly eight years of public discussion about the implications of modern biotechnology.

This duplicity and disrespect is made worse by the book’s failure to even offer some compelling understanding of the scientific enterprise. While Mooney and Kirshenbaum lament Americans’ supposed scientific illiteracy, the authors never explain just why science should matter to the public, nor what its role in our lives should (and should not) be. They don’t even make clear what they take “science” to be, using the term to refer variously to Enlightenment-style rationality, technological progress, and general intellectualism.

In their concluding remark that “science itself must become the common culture,” they wash their hands of the questions they have ignored of how to balance science against other ethical, cultural, and economic concerns. Yet because they do not grapple with science itself, they do

not explain how to resolve the conflicting imperatives of the scientific enterprise. They claim, for instance, that we need science to solve man-made climate change, while offering no account of what role science might have played in creating it in the first place.

The ultimate irony of *Unscientific America* is that the book itself is such a perfect example of the very problem it is attempting to solve. The authors are right to criticize politicians who are interested in science only when

it suits their own ends, but Mooney and Kirshenbaum are themselves interested in dialogue only when it suits theirs. The authors instruct scientists to study communication when they should instead be advising scientists to study the disciplines of their interlocutors—ethics, religion, and the humanities—so they can truly engage with rather than merely market themselves to the public.

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