

SO YOU WANT TO BECOME A CRITIC

Introduction

A number of students and former students have asked how established interests react to a critic or what they should do if they aspire to effective criticism. The following response is based on thirty years of personal experience doing public education work regarding atomic energy.¹

A *critic* is defined as one who *publicly expresses* disagreement with established policy or dogma.

The Response to a Critic

A critic must be prepared for attempts to be discredited, intimidated, co-opted, and, or, fired. Attempting to discredit is a routine part of the agenda for dealing with a critic be it relating to atomic energy, drug or tobacco testing, or most other issues. The usual steps in the process are:

The critic appears. The first response is to ignore the critic. The critic either goes away or does not go away.

The critic persists. The second response is for representatives of the established interest to allege that the critic is not an *expert*. These allegations can, by themselves, compromise the critic's employment and reputation. It is much more difficult to sustain a claim of incompetence when the critic comes from within the establishment that is subjected to the critic's attention – in this case the critic becomes a *whistle blower*.²

The critic must demonstrate expertise. He or she must convince someone that they know their subject of criticism. Many critics cannot demonstrate competence and they either fade away or associate with like-minded folks and are largely ignored. Others demonstrate expertise by convincing experienced members of the written press, by withstanding cross-examination at a hearing or in a court, by publishing and meeting the tests of referred journals³, or in other ways.

The critic is allowed a fair hearing. The forum in which the discussions are taking place may respond favorably, the critic will be given what he or she considers to be a fair hearing, and that will more or less be the end of it.

An attempt to co-opt the critic is made. This is often the next step in cases when a fair hearing is granted. The critic will be thanked for bringing the issue to attention and the critic may be asked to serve on this or that *high-level advisory committee* or some such and the critic is admonished to defer any more public activities until the committee's work is done. (One must be particularly wary of *high-level advisory committees*. Such committees are seldom taken seriously or they have a lifetime exceeding the schedule for the events of interest.) Novice critics often take this bait.

¹ Henry Kendall's insightful comments on this topic in: Henry W. Kendall, *A Distant Light: Scientists and Public Policy*, AIP Press/Springer, New York (2000), Introduction pp. 1-7.

² Somewhat different rules apply to whistle-blowers as they now have limited protection by statute and regulation.

³ This is often the weakest test given the proliferation of journals that appear to publish just about everything that comes in over the transom.

The critic persists, has demonstrated expertise, has not been given what he or she considers to be a fair hearing, and has not succumbed to co-option. The fourth response is usually to threaten the critic's well being – threaten to get the critic fired or to get his or her funding cut, assert pressure on officials at his or her university, muck around with the critic's credit rating – or engage in more *personal* efforts to discredit the critic. The latter can take one of several forms, e.g., investigations into the critic's personal life looking for scandal; setting the critic up with a honey trap or some such; alleging that the critic is not really interested in anything other than personal fame or financial gain;⁴ the list goes on. Note that the fourth response, unlike the second response, is easier when the critic is a whistle-blower.

The critic persists, has demonstrated expertise, has not been given what she or he considers to be a fair hearing, does not fall for co-option devices, and it has not been able to otherwise discredit the critic on personal grounds. It seldom gets to this point, but things can get rough.

Hints for the Aspiring Critic

Effective criticism requires discipline and, in some ways, is an art form.

Some suggestions are:

Make no errors, particularly technical errors. Spokespersons for and employees of established interests will be protected by their institutions unless they demonstrate a truly extraordinary degree of incompetence or mendacity. But the critic stands alone, protected only by his or her credibility. The demonstration of error quickly results in the erosion of a critic's credibility.

Understand your own motives, purposes, and goals – understand what you want and why you want it.

Try to understand your opponents' assumptions, arguments, evidence, and goals as well as you understand your own.

Cultivate the press. Understand the press. Never mislead the press. Remember that every interaction with members of the working press is an exchange transaction: they want something from you and you want something from them. The critic's objectives should include being the first person called by the press for comment or explanations. It is also best for the novice critic to avoid TV reporters unless he or she knows that they and their editors know the difference between a scientific or policy disagreement and a train wreck. (Experienced critics understand how to craft ten-second *sound bites* that are irresistible to TV reporters and editors.) An exception to the TV rule is when there is live broadcasting with no possibility of incompetent or malicious editing.

Acquire some friends but avoid the zealots and crackpots who, unfortunately, are usually found in all camps in serious policy debates.

Never assume that a conspiracy is under way. This is not to say that there are no conspiracies, but making such an assumption without there being overwhelming evidence will not only detract from your credibility but also will lead you down hopeless rabbit trails.

Beware of strangers bearing gifts. Be particularly wary of copies of supposedly sensitive documents that are delivered anonymously.

⁴ It is curious that seeking personal attention or financial gain is expected and rewarded in political and financial circles but is suspect for critics. For an insightful discussion see: Price, Don K., *The Scientific Estate*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (1965).

Be scrupulous about your taxes and other financial affairs. A critic's tax returns and credit record will be examined carefully.

Assume that all telephone, email, and such communications are being monitored. They often will be.

Remember that so-called *scientific or technical experts* have no qualifications beyond those of any other citizen to express opinions on policy or political outcomes. A delicate balance between the rôles of credible expert and advocate is difficult to strike.⁵

It is helpful to have competent legal council available from time to time.

Finally, remember that if bitten when swimming with sharks, the cardinal rule is: do not bleed!

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⁵ My primer on this issue has been: Commoner, Barry, *Science & Survival*, Viking Press, New York (1966).