

2 Why science writers should forget Carl Sagan and read Thomas Kuhn

On the troubled conscience of a journalist

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Mad Scientist's Plot Thwarted by Budget Cuts.

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At age 52, I belong to the last generation of American newspaper reporters who wrote at a time when newspapers still mattered, really mattered, as a cultural force. I entered this business the summer that Nixon was driven from office. At that time, Woodward, Bernstein, and Sy Hersh were heroes to an angry young generation. Now legends of their Watergate and My Lai exposés sound like radio signals from a dying star system. Newspapers still make money, sort of, yet they are increasingly timid, colorless, corporate-controlled contributors to post-Millennium discourse. Once, the sharpest newspaper reporters were high-school educated, hard-drinking, working-class souls who read Mencken, James T. Farrell, and *The Masses*, and prided themselves on their hostility to "the comfortable." Now leftists rightly deride us as "stenographers to power," as mouthpieces of the white, college-educated, sober, non-smoking, privileged American status quo who prefer politicians who are "centrists" and "pragmatists" and who buy *The New Yorker* for the cartoons.

In other words, we are boring. Newspaper circulation has been steadily declining for decades, and will continue to do so. Young people do not read us at all; eventually, no one will. And why should they? What do we offer them that they cannot find on TV or online, and in a more vivid, entertaining form? True, TV and the Net are shallow; but so are we. When was the last time a major American newspaper challenged you mentally? Defied your expectations? Exposed you to radically dissenting voices? Shook your paradigms? (The sole exception, naturally, is my present employer, which is flawless and beyond reproach.)

The problems of American newspaper journalism are mirrored, in microcosm, by those of its rarely noticed little subsidiary, science reporting. Most of my career I have worked in science journalism; and in this essay, I must say some unkind things about its present state. But before I bite the hand that feeds me, let me explain why I love this career despite its shortcomings. Before I bash it, let me clarify why I have remained a science journalist for a quarter of a century, well past the age at which most newspaper journalists, exhausted by the long hours and hounded by their children's orthodontist bills, have left for jobs that actually pay living wages.