

How Public Vaccine Policy Apologists Use 'Firehosing' to Spread Misinformation



By Jeremy Hammond, Guest Contributor

On November 7, 2019, the *Guardian* published an [article](#)¹ titled "Firehosing: the systemic strategy that anti-vaxxers are using to spread misinformation".

The summary description of the article stated, "Anti-vaxxers keep telling the same obvious lies without shame, despite being debunked and factchecked". It was written by Lucky Tran, whose author bio describes him as a scientist with a PhD in biochemistry.

In his article, Dr. Tran attacks talk show host Bill Maher for having hosted a discussion with Dr. Jay Gordon that was critical of public vaccine policy. He states that Gordon is "a controversial doctor who peddles misinformation about vaccines". He lectures Maher for "giving an anti-vaxxer a high-profile platform to spread lies and cause harm to an audience of millions." Tran continues:

The 14-minutes interview on Real Time with Bill Maher doubled down on all the dangerous views we've heard before: highlighting discredited work on vaccines and autism, disingenuously labelling measles a benign illness, and questioning a vaccine schedule that has been proven safe and effective by decades of research.

Implicitly, since Bill Maher and Dr. Gordon were in agreement throughout the interview, Tran is not only accusing Maher giving a platform to a lying "anti-vaxxer" but also of being one himself.

Continuing, Tran says that "anti-vaxxers" use "systemic strategies" to "spread their misinformation", including "firehosing", which "relies on pushing out as many lies as possible as frequently as possible." The intention is "to rob

facts of their power” by inundating us “with so many wild opinions that it becomes exhausting to continually disprove them.”

It’s a strategy, Tran adds, that “is effective for those trying to hold on to political power” and “for those who gain power from engaging in science denial.”

This is a bizarre claim given that those with a tight hold on political power are precisely those who continually declare that vaccines are “safe and effective”, which is a meaningless assertion since the potential benefits and risks are different for each vaccine and every individual.

Beyond that, it’s a remarkable article because, to anyone who’s actually *seen* the interview and is at least fairly knowledgeable about what the science has to say about vaccines, it is patently obvious that it’s Dr. Tran along with the *Guardian* and every other major media organization who are systematically engaging in science denial and utilizing the strategy of “firehosing” to misinform the public about vaccines in service to the existing political establishment.

The first obvious clue that this Guardian piece is itself propaganda is the fact that Tran accuses [Bill Maher and Dr. Gordon] of spreading lies and misinformation but fails to specify even one thing that either of them said during the interview that wasn’t true or reasonable.

Thou Shalt Not Criticize Vaccines

Appropriately, the very first point Bill Maher and Dr. Gordon discussed during [the interview](#)² (which can be viewed [here](#)³) is how anyone who dares to speak critically



about this one particular pharmaceutical product is viciously attacked. The *Guardian* simply proves their point by publishing an article that attacks them personally *without* substantively addressing *any* of their arguments. This is the fallacy of ad hominem argumentation.

Another fallacy of Tran’s is strawman argumentation, which is falsely attributing arguments to others that they didn’t make and then challenging the fiction instead of the real argument.

The first obvious clue that this *Guardian* piece is itself propaganda is the fact that Tran accuses the men of spreading lies and misinformation but fails to specify *even one thing* that either of them said during the interview that wasn’t true or reasonable. There’s not a single quote provided to support Tran’s characterizations of the interview, nor even a paraphrase. This is a common practice among professional propagandists and a huge red flag for savvy consumers of news media.

While dismissing the views expressed by Maher as “anti-vaccine”, in fact Maher praised vaccine as a wonderful invention, saying, “Of course vaccines work, and we applaud them for all the great things they’ve done. They’re a great tool in the medical kit.” Maher explicitly stated, “I’m not an ‘anti-vaxxer’.” Neither gentleman denied that vaccination can have benefits; *they simply observed the uncontroversial fact that vaccination also entails risks that must be weighed against those benefits on an individual basis.*

Opinion
Vaccines and immunisation

Firehosing: the systemic strategy that anti-vaxxers are using to spread misinformation

Lucky Tran

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Anti-vaxxers keep telling the same obvious lies without shame, despite being debunked and factchecked



▲ A woman receives a flu vaccine in San Francisco in 2018. Photograph: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

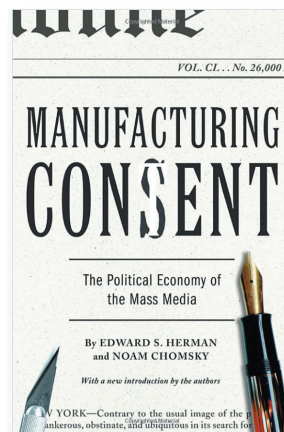
Yet again a popular show is giving an anti-vaxxer a high-profile platform to spread lies and cause harm to an audience of millions. This time it's Bill Maher *who last week hosted Jay Gordon*, a controversial doctor who peddles misinformation about vaccines and is best known for providing hundreds of personal belief exemptions for families to forgo school vaccine requirements.

This is a fact that increasingly authoritarian public policymakers refuse to acknowledge.

Evidently Dr. Tran, despite presenting himself a "scientist", also does not want people to be aware that vaccination entails risk. This helps to explain why he resorts to baselessly attacking the messengers, which is a propaganda technique dubbed "flak" by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their seminal treatise on the subject, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*.⁴

The purpose of "flak" is to create an atmosphere of intimidation in which dissent is not tolerated and alternative perspectives are dismissed as extreme for varying from the narrow range of allowable opinion.

All Gordon and Maher said was that it is plausible that, in rare cases, vaccines might cause autism.



Thou Shalt Not Propose Biologically Plausible Medical Hypotheses That Vaccines Cause Serious Harm

According to Tran, Gordon and Maher "highlighted discredited work on vaccines and autism". Tellingly, though, Tran does not specify what "discredited work" was supposedly "highlighted" during the interview. We could make an educated guess about what work Tran is referring

to, but that's unnecessary since the accusation is a lie. Nowhere during the interview was any discredited work mentioned to support their views. All Gordon and Maher said was that it is plausible that, in rare cases, vaccines *might* cause autism.

That is not science denial. On the contrary, it is the very same conclusion arrived at by the Institute of Medicine in a 2004 review *falsely cited*⁵ by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as supportive of its claim that "Vaccines Do Not Cause Autism". It is true that the IOM in that review stated that the weight of evidence

from the retrospective observational studies that had been done favored rejection of the hypothesis. However, as the IOM also pointed out, the hypothesis “cannot be excluded” by observational studies finding no association due to the limitations of this type of study design, which is prone to selection biases that can invalidate findings. The IOM also pointed out that none of the studies that had been done considered the possibility of genetically susceptible subpopulations.

Since none of the studies have been designed to test the hypothesis that vaccines administered according to the CDC’s schedule can contribute to the development of autism in genetically susceptible individuals, none of them could possibly have falsified that hypothesis. The claim to the contrary is a blatant lie grounded in a fundamental *rejection* of the standards of evidence adopted by the Institute of Medicine.

Furthermore, in 2008, CDC Director Julie Gerberding [acknowledged](#)⁶ that, in children with mitochondrial disorders, vaccines can cause brain damage manifesting as symptoms of autism. She was speaking with reference to a girl named Hannah Poling, who developmentally regressed into diagnosed autism after receiving nine vaccine doses at once at nineteen months of age. Her family was awarded compensation under the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP), which was established under a 1986 law that granted near total legal immunity to manufacturers of vaccines recommended for routine use in children by the CDC. The effect of the law is to [shift the financial burden for vaccine injuries](#)⁷ away from the pharmaceutical industry and onto the taxpaying consumers, which of course includes the victims.

Young Hannah, whose father is a neurologist, happened also to be a patient of a leading expert on autism, Dr. Andrew Zimmerman, who has served as an expert witness on behalf of the government in VICP cases. Referring to Hannah, he [wrote in a sworn affidavit](#)⁸ last year that he told the government’s lawyers “that in a subset of children with an underlying mitochondrial dysfunction, vaccine induced fever and immune stimulation that exceeded metabolic energy reserves could, and in at least one of my patients, did cause regressive encephalopathy with features of autism spectrum disorder.”

The government lawyers at that point ceased calling him as an expert witness to testify during VICP cases. Furthermore, in a later case, in order to deny compensation to the petitioning family, they *falsely* claimed that Dr. Zimmerman’s view was that vaccines can’t cause autism.

In a 2014 interview with journalist Sharyl Attkisson (a rare journalist who writes honestly about vaccines), the director of the CDC’s “Immunization Safety Office”, Dr. Frank DeStefano, [acknowledged](#)⁹ that “it’s a possibility” that vaccines could trigger autism in genetically susceptible individuals, but that the problem is it’s “very hard to predict who those children might be”.

Neither Bill Maher nor Dr. Gordon cited any “discredited work on vaccines and autism” during their discussion. What they said during the show was no different than what the Institute of Medicine and even the CDC’s head of “Immunization Safety” has admitted, which is that it is biologically plausible that at least in rare cases vaccines can cause autism.

This fearmongering is propaganda designed to obscure the reality that during the pre-vaccine era, measles was regarded as a benign childhood illness.

Thou Shalt Not Characterize Measles in a Way That’s Not Scary

Dr. Tran accuses Maher and Gordon of “disingenuously labelling measles a benign illness”, but this accusation, too, is false, for the simple reason that, in a developed country like the US, measles generally *is* a benign illness in children.

Neither Maher nor Gordon denied the fact that the virus can cause serious harm or even death. They simply alluded to the historical fact that, during the pre-vaccine era, most children who were infected with measles had immune systems that handled the virus just fine on their own, without any serious complications.

These days, because the CDC recommends that every child be vaccinated with two doses of the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, we’re supposed to be afraid of measles. The [fear marketing](#)¹⁰ helps to increase demand for the pharmaceutical industry’s vaccine products.

We’re supposed to perceive measles as a deadly disease rather than a mostly benign infection that confers lifelong immunity that enables mothers, in turn, [to protect their babies](#)¹¹ with antibodies transferred prenatally through the placenta and postnatally through breastmilk. This

fearmongering is propaganda designed to obscure the reality that during the pre-vaccine era, measles *was* regarded as a benign childhood illness.

This is easily enough demonstrated simply by quoting the description¹² of measles by public health officials in 1967. According the Public Health Service, “For centuries the measles virus has maintained a remarkably stable ecological relationship with man. The clinical disease is a characteristic syndrome of notable constancy and only moderate severity. Complications are infrequent, and, with adequate medical care, fatality is rare.”

Mass vaccination has destroyed that natural herd immunity, thereby shifting the risk burden in the event of exposure away from those in whom it is generally a benign illness and onto those who are at higher risk of complications.

A paper published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 1962, one year before the first vaccine was licensed, similarly described¹³ measles as a “self-limiting infection of short duration, moderate severity, and low fatality” that has “maintained a remarkably stable biological balance over the centuries.” The dramatic decline in measles deaths that had occurred *before* the vaccine was introduced “demonstrates the degree to which we have adapted to this balance” and learned to live with the virus.

The fact that measles *was* considered a generally benign illness during the pre-vaccine era is also easily demonstrated by recalling how it was characterized in popular culture. Here is an excellent compilation of clips from television shows demonstrating how measles was perceived among the general public:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDb0ZS3vB9g>

Even today the CDC in its authoritative “Pink Book” describes¹⁴ the clinical course of measles as “usually transient and benign”. So, if we apply Dr. Tran’s logic, the CDC itself is guilty of disingenuously misinforming the



public about measles. (The CDC certainly does misinform the public about vaccines, as already shown, but certainly not on this count!)

Again, this is not to say that there weren't severe cases of measles resulting in complications or even death before the vaccine. But deaths were rare, occurring at a rate of one to two deaths per 10,000 cases (not one per 1,000 cases as falsely claimed¹⁵ by the CDC and routinely propagated by the media). Only about 400 to 500 deaths occurred each year due to measles, and that rate was on the decline as the US population developed a natural herd immunity in which infants were protected through maternal immunity and elderly adults were protected by the permanent immunity gained from being infected during childhood, along with the natural beneficial boosting effect of repeated exposures to the circulating virus.

Mass vaccination has destroyed that natural herd immunity, thereby shifting the risk burden¹⁶ in the event of exposure away from those in whom it is generally a benign illness and onto those who are at higher risk of complications. This is acknowledged in the medical literature by leading experts on measles, but the public isn't supposed to know about it. Hence the reliance on "firehosing" to overwhelm the public with lies about vaccine safety and effectiveness, in which anyone who dares to speak critically about public vaccine policy is treated as a heretic.

... studies designed to examine the long-term effects of the cumulative number of vaccines or other aspects of the immunization schedule have not been conducted.

Thou Shalt Not Question the CDC's Infallibility

Finally, Tran accuses Maher and Gordon of "questioning a vaccine schedule that has been proven safe and effective by decades of research".

The fact that Tran criticizes even the mere "questioning" of the CDC's routine childhood vaccine schedule is a

clear illustration of how he treats vaccination as a matter not of science but religion. To Tran, the CDC's schedule is sacrosanct, beyond question. To Tran, the CDC is infallible in its vaccine recommendations.

This is, of course, not serious. It's ludicrous dogmatism. It is faith, not science.

Tran's claim that the CDC's schedule has been "proven safe and effective by decades of research" is also patently false. Once again, to illustrate what an egregious lie that is and how it's Tran who's engaging in science denialism, all we need to do is turn once more to the Institute of Medicine, which acknowledged¹⁷ in a 2013 report that "existing research has not been designed to test the entire immunization schedule" and that "studies designed to examine the long-term effects of the cumulative number of vaccines or other aspects of the immunization schedule have not been conducted."

The Takeaway

Dr. Tran's attack on Dr. Gordon and Bill Maher is sheer hypocrisy. He is doing precisely what he accuses them of doing, which is to overwhelm the reader with lies, regardless of how absurd and obvious his lies are.

He may call himself a "scientist" in his author bio, but with this *Guardian* piece, he's not behaving like one. Instead, he is behaving as a propagandist who's serving the pharmaceutical industry and the government by issuing flak to marginalize dissenting voices and intimidate critics into silence and by otherwise misinforming the public in order to manufacture consent for public vaccine policy.

Rather than condemning Bill Maher, we should applaud him for having enough integrity and honesty to host a serious discussion about this important topic in which *legitimate* criticisms of public vaccine policy are made. The idea that we should *not* be having that discussion is not only absurd but also dangerous.

Our children's health and our liberty are on the line. What is truly condemnable and intolerable are the blatant lies told by charlatans like Dr. Tran and the general trend among the mainstream corporate media to do public policy advocacy rather than journalism.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/07/firehosing-the-systemic-strategy-that-anti-vaxxers-are-using-to-spread-misinformation>
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=467ABUMLGIU>
- 3 <https://thehighwire.com/bill-maher-has-open-vaccine-debate-crowd-applauds/>
- 4 <https://www.amazon.com/Manufacturing-Consent-Political-Economy-Media/dp/0375714499/>
- 5 <https://www.jeremyrhammond.com/2019/05/14/the-cdcs-criminal-recommendation-for-a-flu-shot-during-pregnancy/>
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- 7 <https://www.jeremyrhammond.com/2019/07/01/is-the-vaccine-injury-compensation-program-evidence-of-vaccine-safety/>
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- 9 <https://www.jeremyrhammond.com/2019/05/14/the-cdcs-criminal-recommendation-for-a-flu-shot-during-pregnancy/>
- 10 <https://www.jeremyrhammond.com/2018/04/02/how-the-cdc-uses-fear-and-deception-to-sell-more-flu-vaccines/>
- 11 <https://childrenshealthdefense.org/news/cdc-lies-about-and-media-repeats-risk-of-dying-from-measles/>
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- 13 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1522578/>
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- 17 <https://www.jeremyrhammond.com/2019/01/11/how-youre-being-lied-to-about-the-risks-of-getting-a-flu-vaccine-annually/>