

Why Gwyneth Paltrow is Wrong About Nearly Everything

I admit I laughed hard when I stumbled on [this joke](#) by Warren Holstein a few months ago:

Gwyneth Paltrow's New Year's Resolutions:

- 1) Win war on gluten.
- 2) Expand Goop brand.
- 3) Condescend less to rabble.
- 4) Delete all Coldplay.

I laughed so hard because the joke skewers so accurately. And we actually have scientific backing for the fun Holstein had with (1) and (2).

[This article from ThinkProgress.org](#) yesterday borrows the title of a book that was published a little over a year ago: [Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?: When Celebrity Culture and Science Clash](#). A “thorough takedown of celebrity pseudoscience,” it’s by Timothy Caulfield, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy at the University of Alberta School of Public Health. Already long, the article is an edited and condensed version of a recent phone interview with Caulfield about...

“...why so many of us trust self-proclaimed lifestyle experts with no actual medical credentials, why cleanses are really just celeb-speak for ‘temporary, socially-sanctioned eating disorders,’ and how growing skepticism of the scientific community has created a space for people like Gwyneth to control the national conversation about health.”

Some of the questions asked by the author, Jessica Goldstein, are ones that I've been asking myself for a while now. It's refreshing to hear Caulfield's answers, and the interview itself is more like a dialogue. By all means read it for yourself.

Here I'll just highlight a few themes Caulfield identifies in the market for celebrity pseudoscience that are especially worthy of note.

The first is what I like to call "tribalism." Thus:

"If you ask someone, is Gwyneth Paltrow a credible source of information about breast cancer risk? Most people are going to say no. The science of nutrition? Most people will be skeptical. But because she has such a huge cultural footprint, and because she has made this brand for herself, people will identify with it."

It's a little bit of the Prius effect, this idea that we make decisions, and we all do it, that fit with our identity package of who we think we are. We buy organic food because we think we are the kind of person who does that, and it's the same with driving a Prius, and we want the world to know that."

We see that sort of tribalism in politics, too.

Another example, also with its counterpart in politics, is how things that are intuitively plausible and convenient become popular regardless of the evidence:

"...another thing celebrity culture does, very effectively, whether it's intentional or not: They play on our intuition. That terminology, detox, is such a great example. It seems intuitively correct. There's this idea that we have all these toxins in our life that we have to get rid of them. When I met with [Gwyneth's doctor, Dr. Alejandro Junger](#), in

Hollywood, he talked about the idea that our cities are like a dirty fishbowl. And that has an appeal; it really rings true for people. So I think that also increases their power. But there's no evidence.

I love the detox topic because you don't have to equivocate about how you talk about it. There's no ongoing debate. It's completely ridiculous from a scientific perspective on every level. The idea that we need to detoxify our bodies – we have organs that do it. There's no evidence that the regimens proposed, including the one I tried, actually works... But it plays to our intuition in a very powerful way. It really helps sell the idea."

Another case where the facts hardly matter when the famous people you admire are peddling something plausible. Conversely, "...you can't build a show around, 'Don't smoke, exercise, eat fruits and vegetables.'" That about sums up the problem.

The most troubling aspect of this, though, is not that celebrity sells stuff—that's always been true and always will be—but how greater space for quackery is being created by what Caulfield calls the "growing skepticism about the scientific community." As I've written [before](#), there's much to suggest that public science is broken. The skepticism accordingly has *some* justification. And that cannot be good for anybody.