

nature biotechnology

In defense of the press... and more

The biotech community's decision to speak out in defense of freedom of the press is also a reaffirmation of core principles essential for the sector's success.

This issue features a Correspondence signed by 169 biotech leaders who are speaking out in support of a free press. The signatories come from many different corners of the biotech community and include biotech CEOs and executives, entrepreneurs, investors and researchers who are deeply committed to the sector's success. They are making their statement as individuals, rather than official representatives of their companies and institutions. All are concerned by the increasingly inflammatory political rhetoric demonizing the media as “the enemy of the people.” They believe that a free and independent press is central not only to an open, democratic society, but also to the central tenets on which the biotech sector is based: freedom of expression and fact-based discourse. In this context, partisan attacks undermining the mainstream media—and alienating the public from journalists—pose an existential threat to the biotech industry.

Freedom of the press has been a long-held principle of democratic societies. Government ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’ works best when the public is well informed—and a free press is the best mechanism to do this. At least that is the idea.

Of course, there is nothing new about US presidents bemoaning unfair media coverage or criticizing news outlets for unflattering or inaccurate stories. What is new is the characterization of *all* stories critical of the administration as ‘fake news’ and the portrayal of the mainstream media as ‘crooked’. Attacks on the press undermine public confidence and trust in the media, sow confusion about what is true and foment hatred of journalists. At the same time, the increasing use of social media emphasizes discord over reasoned debate, spreads misinformation and inflames partisan differences, creating echo chambers in which citizens hear or read only like-minded opinions. This has repercussions.

Outside the United States, the country's standing as a defender of free speech has been diminished, emboldening repressive regimes to suppress freedom of the press without fear of reprisal; inside the United States, violence against journalists is on the rise. In the first eight months of this year, the FBI has arrested men who allegedly threatened to murder employees of CNN and *The Boston Globe*. Over the same period, the nonprofit Index on Censorship has reported 36 physical attacks on journalists in the United States (compared with 45 for all of 2017, the first year this was tracked). The current environment is sufficiently toxic that in August over 300 newspapers across the United States coordinated editorials in support of a free press.

What has all of this got to do with biotech?

Biotech research and development does not exist in a vacuum. Evidence-based medicine requires an environment in which new ideas can be openly debated and critiqued and where there is agreement about facts and truth. A departure from these principles leads to mediocre science. And mediocre science leads to mediocre medicines. Biotech companies, more than those in most other industry sectors,

have a great responsibility to ensure their products are based on the best science available—patients' lives depend on it.

Legitimate biotech products are different from alternative medicine ‘cures’ or stem cell panaceas. But in a fake news environment, the latter grow in popularity because they offer people what they want to hear. There is a big difference between promising people what they want to hear and actually delivering on those promises. The biotech industry has done the latter over many decades.

History also tells us that separating science from an environment of free inquiry can be calamitous for lives—particularly where the life sciences are involved. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Trofim Lysenko's bogus crop research and pernicious influence on agricultural policy in the Soviet Union not only set back Russian science by decades, but also contributed to the starvation of millions. Lysenko's ideas are now apparently back in vogue in Putin's Russia (*Curr. Biol.* **27**, R1042–R1047, 2017). Similarly, the eugenics movement of the early 20th century resulted in cruel and racist laws in 27 US states and the coercive sterilization of over 60,000 Americans deemed ‘unfit’ to reproduce.

Biotech thus benefits from an environment in which a robust media can highlight bad science, disseminate new research advances, expurgate medical myths and shine sunlight on bad practices. Examples of such reporting include *The Wall Street Journal's* exposé of fraud at blood-testing company Theranos; *The Sunday Times* of London's investigation into bogus links between autism and the MMR vaccine; and *The New York Times's* recent story highlighting the hidden financial ties of prominent New York physician-scientist José Baselga with industry.

Supporting a free press is not a partisan issue. Attacks on the liberal press by the alt-right and attacks on free speech on university campuses by the left are two sides of the same coin. A free press and open discourse are essential for society and essential for biotech, irrespective of politics. In a world in which fake news and Google-based searches dominate, those in power can manipulate and popularize anti-elitist, anti-intellectual and anti-science thinking, unchecked by a free press. That is not good news for biotech. And it is not good news for science.

Biotech was born in the United States. It was not born in Russia or China. It did not flourish in any of the other countries where a free press and freedom of speech are under attack. The life science leaders who signed the statement on page 920 are speaking out because they believe that a free press is essential not only to society as a whole, but specifically to their work in discovering new medicines, vaccines and diagnostics. Politicians in democracies should take note. Like-minded readers in the biotech community who agree with these principles should get behind their rallying cry and add their signatures (<https://go.nature.com/2PY9N88>). 