

The rise of sci-washing

Quan-Hoang Vuong

Centre Emile Bernheim
Université Libre de Bruxelles
Email: qvuong@ulb.ac.be

September 9, 2019

On September 4, 2019, science news outlets reported the resigning of UK science minister Jo Johnson from his government and House of Commons position [1]. A major reason cited is the conflict with his UK Prime Minister brother, Boris Johnson, who has been considered an attacker to UK science policies, unlike his predecessor [2]. Although naive analysts may hint at some unexpected benefits due to Boris Johnson's inconsistency and short-termism, which may contribute to his changing minds and supporting some shiny science projects, this is highly uncertain. Even if that slim chance becomes real, that kind of benefit is not desirable.

As a researcher from a developing country, I am deeply concerned about the dangerous trend that governments abuse their powers in deciding the science budget and personnel to manipulate the science policies for their political goals. Unfortunately, in many circumstances, those governments have attacked sciences in the name of science, saying that they believe in and support science. We will need a term to call it, and I suggest “sci-washing.” This problem represents an enormous cost to the economy and is detrimental to the sciences [3].

Unlike populist leaders, such as Donald Trump of the United States, who have ignored scientific evidence and pressured authentic voices in science to shut [4], leaders with a sci-washing tendency are ready to borrow science terms, cite pseudo-science “alternative facts,” and unscientifically act against scientific values, ironically in the name of science. While in developed societies, sci-washing can be partly countered by the free media, which helps inform audiences, the rise of sci-washing can be more detrimental in undemocratic developing countries. Observations from many countries tell us that unqualified candidates can do various monkey businesses to “qualify” for holding science offices, then shape future science policies.

This sci-washing trend must be stopped to mitigate the existential risks to science. Unfortunately, the problem has not been paid sufficient attention and become rampant, evidenced by the mushrooming of Ph.D. degree-granting or professorial titles conferred upon pseudo-scientists, a type of cultural pollution that is proven very hard to tackle. To a large extent, by sustaining the problem or making it more severe, developing countries and their science machinery have made the problem of economic disparities and inequality more problematic.

References

- [1] Else, H. (2019). UK science minister Jo Johnson resigns amid Brexit drama. *Nature News* (September 5); doi: 10.1038/d41586-019-02657-7.
- [2] Else, H. (2019). What Boris Johnson's leadership could mean for science. *Nature*, 572(7767), 13-14. doi: 10.1038/d41586-019-02279-z.

- [3] Vuong, Q. H. (2018). The (ir) rational consideration of the cost of science in transition economies. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2(1), 5. doi: 10.1038/s41562-017-0281-4
- [4] Goldman, G. T. (2019). Trump's plan would make government stupid. *Nature*, 570(7762), 417. doi: 10.1038/d41586-019-01961-6