

When crackpot conspiracy theories are touted as news, we all lose

January 31 2017, by Peter Ellerton



Credit: Eren Li from Pexels

Humans are fascinated by potential disasters, legends or prophecies that promise the end of the world. There is even a word for the study of such things: [eschatology](#), from the Greek *eschatos* for "last" and *-ology* "to

speak" or "to study".

There is also something about the grandeur of such claims that makes them magnets for conspiracy theorists and religious fanatics.

But just because this fascination exists, it doesn't mean it's desirable to pander to it. Not when it's without reason, and especially not in the name of science.

Alt-journalism

Recently the UK's The Sun newspaper demonstrated a spectacular jettisoning of journalistic rigour to report that [Earth was about to be struck by a giant rock](#) and that the results of this collision would be catastrophic.

Now, this is disturbing for three reasons, none of which are do do with the possible consequences of such an impact.

Leaving aside appeals to [alternative facts](#), the first reason this is disturbing is that this claim was published at all.

While there is indeed an [object](#) meandering in our general direction, it will pass us at a distance that is further than the closest approach of the planet Venus.

If you manage to sleep well with Venus in such proximity, this new body need not disturb you either. This bit of information is so easily found that ignoring it in the article speaks volumes about the intent of the piece.

And that's leaving aside nonsensical sentences such as "it's so huge you'll be able to see it from Britain", because seeing something from Britain

seems more of an issue of positioning than size.

The second reason is that this tenuous thread of hysteria was linked to wider [conspiracy theories](#), an act one can only assume was intended to give it more popular appeal, if not actual credibility.

One of those theories is that the object is a segment of the fabled planet [Nibiru](#), long held to be the doom of humanity by an impressive array of [crackpots](#).

Why such theories are so popular is an interesting question, but that they proliferate is beyond doubt.

An unethical appeal to science

The third disturbing reason is that the heading ended with the tag "according to this scientist". Except there is no evidence for the existence of the "scientist" mentioned in the article, neither in academic literature or in university records.

Google seems to find no trace of his name prior to it [appearing in a "news" story](#) on a [conspiracy theory website](#). And, of course, on the many Murdoch media outlets that picked up the The Sun's story.

The phrasing of this headline implies this is a scientific claim, or at least a claim made by someone accepted into the community of scientists. As such, it seeks a justification in the rationality of science and taps into the public respect for scientists as agents of this collective rationality.

To make matters worse, The Sun is lending what residual respect it has as a newspaper to this supposed link. One can only imagine that in future articles it will be scientists, not The Sun, that will suffer the eye-rolling and tutting once this farcical prediction fails to materialise.

The intent of the article, therefore, is to produce unease at best, and panic at worst, by buttressing the claims of a clutch of hysterical conspiracy theorists through an appeal to the credibility of science and scientists and to deliberately conflate an actual event with an apocalyptic prediction.

This is as questionable a use of science as a doctor claiming that vaccines cause autism, or using scientific-sounding [piffle](#) to sell health products. The unethical use of science is not restricted to scientists.

It is true that the article calls this a belief held by "crackpot theorists", but a lot of space is spent outlining this theory and weaving in some factual data. And this and an [earlier](#) article work up some dire consequences and a "warning" from NASA (not to mention some lovely graphics).

Credibility in freefall

By reporting unsubstantiated claims, by promoting potential narratives linking these claims to conspiracy theories and by suggesting that any or all of these have scientific credibility, The Sun shows its value, or lack thereof, as a source of news (though perhaps it sees a new market emerging in [fake news](#)).

It, along with the other [media outlets](#) who publish this dross, is the [Ancient Aliens](#) of the History Channel in print.

The Sun is crossing the line that divides the reporting of conspiracy theories and the promotion of them. As the piece in question shows, it's certainly not in the business of debunking them. As a news article, it represents the sloppiest of standards. In its willingness to degrade the credibility of science in an attempt to induce profitable hysteria, it is lamentable.

I can only imagine that, given the attitude of The Sun to climate scientists, diminishing public faith in [science](#) is to their advantage. Now there's a conspiracy theory to get behind.

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