



Bad Advice: Or Why Celebrities, Politicians, and Activists Aren't Your Best Source of Health Information

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Science doesn't speak for itself. Neck-deep in work that can be messy and confounding, and naive in the ways of public communication, scientists are often unable to package their insights into the neat narratives that the public requires. Enter the celebrities, the advocates, the lobbyists, and the funders behind them, who take advantage of scientists' reluctance to provide easy answers, flooding the media with misleading or incorrect claims about health risks. Amid this onslaught of spurious information, Americans are more confused than ever about what's good for them and what isn't.

In *Bad Advice*, Paul A. Offit shares hard-earned wisdom on the do's and don'ts of battling misinformation. For the past twenty years, Offit has been on the front lines in the fight for sound science and public health. Stepping into the media spotlight as few scientists have done--such as being one of the first to speak out against conspiracy theories linking vaccines to autism--he found himself in the crosshairs of powerful groups intent on promoting pseudoscience. *Bad Advice* discusses science and its adversaries: not just the manias stoked by slick charlatans and their miracle cures but also corrosive, dangerous ideologies such as Holocaust and climate-change denial. Written with wit and passion, Offit's often humorous guide to taking on quack experts and self-appointed activists is a must-read for any American disturbed by the recent uptick in politicized attacks on science.

Bad Advice: Or Why Celebrities, Politicians, and Activists Aren't Your Best Source of Health Information Details

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Claire says

I'm historically a huge fan of Offit's work and consider Autism's False Prophets and Deadly Choices among my favorite books. Perhaps I had unrealistic expectations for this one and didn't read the synopsis closely enough; but rather than an in depth scientific review, this book was much more anecdotal and recycled. For instance, on chapter relies very heavily on transcripts from The Colbert Report, The Daily Show, and Last Week Tonight (all shows I love, but I had already viewed all of the examples cited). Another basically reviewed the plots of two epidemic based movies. Finally, there was extensive writing on Andrew Wakefield in the final third of the book. Wakefield is a name that instantly increases my blood pressure, but Offit has been there done that. The entire book also relies heavily on Offit's own short stories or opinions on current events/pop-culture/politics, rather than solid facts on scientific/medical cases.

All that said, there are some interesting new tidbits (ex. Natural Rubella in the first trimester of pregnancy is a cause of autism, so MMR actual helps prevent one form of autism) and Offit provides good evidence for the scientific claims within his pages.

Jamie says

I like to Dr. Offit's talks on immunology and though I agree on the main theme, his arguments were weak. Instead of focusing on hard science he uses the anecdotal to prove his points. I was expecting someone like Thomas Sowell and instead got Howard Schultz. Dr. Offit should stick to what he does best and inform the public on immunology.

Jean says

Offit writes a humorous, personal account of learning the hard way how to present scientific ideas to the media--which is sometimes hostile and sometimes twists the truth. His unique perspective reflects on his public responses over several decades to the fallacy "vaccines cause autism," and the lessons he learned. The deeper message is "science seems to be losing its place as a source of truth," and how that trend must change.

Nadia Day says

This book

Just gets me fired up. Unfortunately, I know the people that could benefit the most from reading this book won't be the ones reading it . Offit does a Great job of explaining the science behind vaccines in an easy to understand manner ??

Harriet Huestis says

The book is more about Dr Offit's journey as a communicator and public scientist than the bad health advice of celebrities and politicians(though that is there too).

Scott S. says

4.5 stars

Very informative and personal, with a lot of well-timed and -placed self-deprecating humor, Dr. Offit's book was a simultaneously entertaining and educating for a non-science person. (The numerous Philadelphia references also didn't hurt, since I'm a southeast PA native.) It was a sort of bittersweet fun - keeping in mind the serious 'big picture' that medications / vaccinations are meant to prevent serious harm or death in the young, after all - to have him deflate theories / arguments put forth by the trio of the title. His chapter near the conclusion - explaining how he received his calling as a physician - was quietly illuminating. I'm now interested in checking out his other books.

Shawna says

I like Paul Offit. This is the third book of his I've read, but it all felt like "stuff I already knew." Or that he's preaching to the choir because anti vaxxers sure aren't going to read this. This book in large part felt like a self defense and I didn't need to hear it. I'm already on his side.

Allie says

This rating/review is based on an ARC I received from my job at the library.

Good, but definitely not as strong as *Do You Believe in Magic?: The Sense and Nonsense of Alternative Medicine*. My ARC has lots of flags of interesting information, and a few for some other issues I had*. There was one chapter in particular that was particularly compelling. Dr. Offit addresses reasons for science denial and anti-science thinking and addresses point by point why those modes of thought are harmful and counterintuitive.

Generally I feel like Dr. Offit could take a page from the Mary Roach school of footnotes. This book doesn't have any, but I felt that chunks of the text would be better served if they weren't actually part of the body text. Things like his terrible jokes, asides about the individuals he worked with, and anecdotes about his kids would fit well as a note at the bottom of the page and, in my opinion, would be more fun and endearing if I can opt-in.

Overall a good read, but I would read *Do You Believe in Magic?* first.

*I feel like this book could have benefited from a sensitivity read re: disability. There were a few instances where, when talking about autism, the tone was clinical, negative, and didn't refute the idea that living autism

is impossible and children are doomed. A sentence after quoting [I can't even type her name she makes me furious] about how the "light went out of her son's eyes" to discredit that idea would be great. There are a bunch of #ActuallyAutistic people on twitter who are regular ass people living their lives (a good follow is Morénike Giwa Onaiwu). Living with a disability in a ableist society isn't easy, but disability makes you who you are. You don't need to say that it's going to be easy, but just say that it's possible.

Bren says

This book was very informative and thus a worthwhile read. It's 211 pages and I finished it in 4 days which speaks to it's readability (and amount of pages). For me to so quickly finish a science book is evidence that it was indeed meant for the lay person such as myself. The author writes clearly and with a good sense of humor which is a nice touch when speaking of what can at times be an ugly topic.

He does however spend too much time talking about himself. Much of this undoubtedly has to do with the fact that he knows more about his own experiences than those of other vaccine defenders. But sometimes it came across as the greatest hits of Paul Offit's many televised interviews, talks, debates etc. And towards the end of the book he gets pretty heavy into the "woe is me" sentiment for all of the hate mails, threats etc he has been confronted with. And while he deserves pity for what these people have done to him, it took away from what the book was supposed to be about.

Bottom line; Good and informative book but could have accomplished its alleged goal (subtitle) in about 40 less pages.

Renee says

This book was OK, but it was focused specifically on vaccines which was not really what I had expected. Basically it is a super-informative overview of the fight against misinformation about vaccines, which I'm not against to begin with, so it didn't really get me fired up. Some fun anecdotes about the author's role in fighting science-deniers and the current (insane) anti-science movement. I already know Gwen Paltrow and Dr. Oz are money-grubbing idiots -- but if you aren't aware of that then this book may be a quick and informative read for you.

jeffrey says

A well-written and reasoned work, I doubt it will change any minds that are already set in the anti-vaccine mode. I found it particularly sad that many of the most strongly anti-vaccine segments of our society are the most well-educated.

Doninaz says

The subtitle of this book is "Why celebrities, politicians, and activists aren't your best source of health information." I was expecting the book to address this question, but it did so unevenly. Author Paul Offit is a medical doctor whose background is research. He provides valuable educational material. But, he also gives

the impression of a dedicated professional who was affected by his tangles with anti-vaccine activists, and who used this book to rectify himself.

So, although many health issues need attention, Offit zeroes in on his area of expertise: vaccines, with emphasis on the Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR) vaccine. Other topics such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs), gluten intolerance, and overdosing with dietary supplements are dealt with less thoroughly. Worse, Offit veers into descriptions of his personal confrontations with anti-vaccine forces. He elaborates on the frustration of trying to work through the media. For me, this peripheral attention diminishes Offit's presentation of health issues.

The book's balance seems inconsistent. For example, he expounds on his testimony before a congressional hearing on vaccines and autism. And, he devotes a full chapter to the career of Andrew Wakefield, a discredited activist. I relished the educational parts of the book, while skipping sections featuring personalities.

Yet, Offit understands science, and he enlightens readers with a basic explanation of the scientific method and statistical concepts. For example, I appreciated being reminded about statistical probabilities, and how scientists can "never prove never." I liked Offit's comparison of two movies that contrasted the handling of uncontrollable epidemics. He explained how one film reflected a realistic approach, while the other was "Hollywood."

Offit's book is valuable in explaining how extreme "true believers" can be; and how their decisions' outcomes, such as with vaccine avoidance, can be harmful. He illustrates that popularity is not a substitute for knowledge. And, he makes the point that misguided individuals, opportunists, hucksters, and frauds roam the scene. But, a single glimpse at late night TV could confirm that. I was looking to learn.

Jakub Ferencik says

"Bad Advice" by Paul A. Offit was a book that I didn't know about at all when I picked it up from the library. I've become interested in celebrity culture & the unhealthy obsession that America has with it. And for some reason, I like reading smart people proving celebrities wrong.

Needless to say, vaccines have NOT been open to debate in scientific circles in America for the last 70 years (since the 1950s). Some, however, still insist that vaccines cause autism.

This issue is not related to vaccines only. America has a history of distrust & un-scientific reasoning. Susan Jacoby does a fantastic job at entangling some of the mystery behind that in her book, "The Age of American Unreason." I have reviewed that book as well if you want to check it out.

This scientific skepticism is not restricted to vaccines. Right-wingers - especially - still doubt that evolution is a testable theory. Candace Owens - among others - still thinks that Climate change is a hoax.

It is unfortunate that "Unreason," to borrow from Susan Jacoby, is so common within this world. With the help of eloquent writers such as Offit, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, & Neil Degraffe Tyson, we may overcome this age of scientific skepticism.

Offit goes through some of his experience debating with celebrities, religious people, and others. He shares tips on what to do & how. He even cites the debate between Michael Shermer and Holocaust deniers. If you're interested in this issue at all, I'd recommend this book. It's very clear & properly structured.

Joshua Thornburg says

Compelling, insightful and reflective

I enjoyed how the author focuses on how scientists and those who support the sciences may not always have the best communication with their detractors. But by steadfastly sticking to the evidence and keeping integrity, can feel proud of their accomplishments and defend their knowledge.

Marya says

Once more, Paul Offit offers another book to preach to choir. I liked his anecdotes, and I did learn a thing or two, but this tone is still not calibrated for anyone other than a fervent believer of what he preaches. I really sympathize with his rage, but right now, screaming at people to "grow up" and stop believing in magic doesn't seem like a winning strategy. Offit himself realizes this is a problem and is working on it. Maybe the next book will get it perfect.
