A comic moment for Social Epistemology
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Spun, Framed, Sold and Visioneering?

What can a comic tell us about the distribution of knowledge, especially highly technical knowledge emerging from Big Science projects at the end of the twentieth century? It turns out that a comic can tell us quite a lot.

In thinking about the category of ‘popular science’ in the late twentieth century, there are 2 dominant narratives (with almost endless variation).

1. The first way of thinking is that popular science is the predominant form in which non-scientists get scientific knowledge (with the TV and now the internet as key to consumption patterns) and this is important because popularization can be harnessed to improve levels of knowledge about science and even provide a critical ‘fourth estate’ for science.

2. The second way of thinking is that popular science is the predominant form in which non-scientists get scientific information and this is worrying because this is where scientific knowledge goes through the mangle of popularization and is ‘framed’ ‘spun’ and ‘sold.’

And as Stephen Hilgartner chronicled in his canonical article on popular science, if scientists themselves get burned by the first way of thinking, they can always try the second. 1 Or, more seriously, Hilgartner reflected that these two takes on ‘popularisation’ as knowledge distribution are themselves rhetorical resources for those who will popularize to justify their activities and critique others doing the same.

It is extraordinarily difficult to escape the pull of these two narratives. Both accounts are mired in wishful thinking—the first, in the wishful thinking that popular forms of media will prevail where science and civic education has failed. The second account succumbs

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to the fantasy of an all-powerful mediation selling the wonders of science to dupe after dupe.

In my research, it has taken a comic to pose some new questions about popular science at the end of the twentieth century. From 1961 to 1979 a science ‘faction’ comic called *Frontiers of Science* was syndicated to around 200 newspapers in 19 languages around the world. In the 1970s when the comic was in Sunday papers in Australia, it easily had a reach to 3 million people on any given Sunday. What is remarkable about this, in addition to its reach, is the way it was used. Children and teachers would cut strips from the paper to make ersatz science comic ‘textbooks’. This might seem to vindicate theorists of the first account above. Indeed, readers would write into newspapers, as one woman did to the *Toronto Star*, complaining about how women were represented (or not) in the comic, and by association, in scientific research.

But the strip is also remarkable in the way that it framed the issues in the 1960s which would become the wicked problems of the end of the century — the comic suggested in 1961 that water shortage might be as important as getting someone on the moon. The comic argued that technofixes to pollution, overpopulation, and energy shortage could be found in dustbin rocketry, birth control pills, and everything nuclear. In this way, the comic framed our problems as scientific and sold readers on the technofixes that were spun to look as easy and attractive as possible. So, theorists of the second sort can feel vindicated too.

For the conversation that is emerging on this blog, the important message that this example gives for social epistemologists interested in the power of science fiction to imagine futures (as Ryan Cochrane discusses in this blog), visioneering (as Laura Cabrera discusses in this blog), or even in the role of various mediations in distributing knowledge (see Fuller, this blog) is that the form of mediation matters, especially in its ability to get an audience. The comic fashioned itself as a way for papers to ‘sell more copies’ by harnessing the fact that “everyone is science conscious these days”. That is, the comic self-consciously produced a market for itself and for science.

This is what is missing from quite a few accounts of knowledge distribution and especially science popularization — a description of the enabling conditions of mediation itself. In this example, the enabling conditions are a market where knowledge can be
exchanged and a context in which audiences can be produced (pity the reader that thought she was just going to read *The Batman* and was confronted by a science comic instead!). For me, this is a moment where the view of a social epistemologist can shed light on recent history and use it to reflect on the here and now and what should happen next. It might also make us add a bit more of the empirical into an account of visioneering or imagining futures where the social epistemologist can begin to parse the various rhetorical modes of spin, framing, selling and the ways in which audiences (even for popular science) are not found, but made.

Images of *Frontiers of Science* reproduced with the permission of the rights holders Miriam Butler and Angela Raymond. The archive of images is available at http://frontiers.library.usyd.edu.au

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