Ignorance Drowns Out Precaution

NY Times Tech Columnist Has Hands Slapped

March 20, 2015
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The *New York Times* went into damage control mode yesterday after Nick Bilton, a tech columnist and a rising star at the newspaper, suggested that precaution is the best approach to the use of cell phones and wearable electronics.

No sooner had Bilton's column hit print than Margaret Sullivan, the *Times'* Public Editor, chastised Bilton for his naive analysis. (It was posted on the Web a day earlier.) Sullivan targeted the lack of "sophisticated evaluation of serious research." His biggest blunder, according to many readers, was quoting Dr. Joe Mercola, an Internet health entrepreneur. It's worth mentioning that Mercola is no technophobe. He talked to Bilton on a cell phone using a Bluetooth headset.

The original headline of the column had also fanned the flames of discontent: "Could Wearable Computers Be as Harmful as Cigarettes?" This was likely the work of an editor at the *Times'* Styles section where it later appeared in print, with a new headline: "New Gadgets, New Health Worries." It became "The Health Concerns of Wearable Tech" online. (We were reminded of Chris Ketcham's feature in *GQ* five years ago. That headline, "Warning: Your Cell Phone May Be Hazardous to Your Health," ran next to a picture of a pack of Marlboro's and a flip cell phone.)

"Fear mongering," complained a surgeon on Science Blogs; so did an astronomer on Slate. Why did the *Times* quote a "quack"? asked a blogger on Gawker. "Cram it, Bilton," screamed *The Verge*.

Yes, there are many researchers Bilton might have quoted that would have been more rigorous than Mercola. And yes, comparing RF radiation, a "possible" carcinogen, to tobacco smoke, a known carcinogen, is guaranteed to cause an uproar. No one seemed to notice that Bilton also cited advice from Sweden's Lennart Hardell,

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who has published many peer-reviewed papers on cell phone cancer risks.

What got lost in all the name-calling is Bilton's clear message. "After researching this column, talking to experts and poring over dozens of scientific papers," he wrote, "I have stopped holding my phone next to my head and instead use a headset." And then he let a few drops of rain fall on the iWatch love parade. "[W]hen it comes to wearable computers, I'll still buy the Apple Watch, but I won't let it go anywhere near my head. And I definitely won't let any children I know play with it for extended periods of time."

The speed with which Sullivan threw Bilton under the bus was stunning. Compare it, for instance, to what happened last December when a *Times*-sponsored video exonerated power lines from the well-documented childhood leukemia risk based on the say of industry scientists (see our story). Many wanted her to take a hard look at that story; we were among them. She passed.

Sullivan had the good grace to allow Bilton to have his say in her column. Here's part of what he told her:

> "The reality is, we still don't know definitively the causes of cellphones and cancer, but I can tell you one thing, as a technology enthusiast myself, I approached this piece thinking all the research was bogus. But, as I noted in my column, after doing my own reporting on this topic, I'm no longer going to talk on my cellphone for long periods of time without a headset. And I will likely also keep my soon-to-be-born son away from cellphone use until his brain develops, as erring on the side of caution, until more research is done, seems to me to be the smart and intelligent approach to this issue."

Bilton got it right. If his critics took the trouble to do their homework and read the medical and scientific literature, as Bilton did, they might be more careful about offering their off-the-cuff health advice.

Later...

The Editors Go for a Knockout

After we posted our piece above, we learned that an editors' note had been added to the bottom of Bilton's story on the Web. Had we seen those comments, we would have scrapped our headline about slapped hands and replaced it with something like: "NY Times Columnist KO'd by His Own Editors."

March 21, 2015

The Slim Connection

One of our readers, Michael Lerner, the president and cofounder of Commonweal, pointed out a link we neglected to mention. In January, Carlos Slim, became the single largest owner of stock in the New York Times Co., outside the Sulzberger family that controls the newspaper empire. Slim, one of the richest men on the planet, is the co-chair of América Móvil, which has more than 289 million

wireless customers in 25 countries. He owns 16.8% of the Times, according to Reuters.

Surely this potential conflict should have been cited by Margaret Sullivan and the editors of the *New York Times* in their attacks on Bilton and their defense of cell phone safety.

March 28, 2015

Paul Brodeur: *New York Times* Isn't Going to Change "Anytime Soon"

Paul Brodeur ran a piece today in the Huffington Post, reviewing the Bilton-Sullivan affair at the *New York Times.* He then added another recent *Times* RF article into the mix. In last Tuesday's science section, George Johnson made short shrift of the possible RF health risks of WiFi.

Here's part of what Johnson wrote: "From the perspective of science, the likelihood that [cell phone electromagnetic] rays somehow causing harm is about as strong as the evidence for ESP."

Turning Sullivan's own words back on her, Brodeur recites Johnson's ESP sound bite and quips: "So much for 'sophisticated evaluation of serious research' at The *New York Times*."

Can we look forward to better in the future? No, says Brodeur. "[I]t would be wise not to expect any changes anytime soon in The *Times'* coverage of the potential health hazards associated with cell phone radiation," he writes.

April 19, 2015

How the Headline Comparing Cell Phones to Cigarettes Came About

Margaret Sullivan, the *Times*' Public Editor, returned to the Bilton case today —specifically, on how the offending headline, comparing cell phones to cigarettes, came about. In her column, Sullivan wrote:

> In another instance of a headline that changed several times, editors did decide that a corrective editors' note was warranted. It was on a "Disruptions" column by Nick Bilton, which gave unwarranted credence to the idea that digital devices, such as cellphones and the new Apple Watch, may cause cancer. The original headline, written by the copy desk, read "New Wearable Gadgets, New Health Concerns"; but a web producer, apparently in an effort to make the headline more buzzworthy, changed it to read "Could Wearable Computers Be as Harmful as Cigarettes?"
>
> Mr. [Patrick] LaForge [who supervises the 130 copy editors who write most of the headlines] said that wasn't the ideal process —the copy desk should have been asked to change it— and that the new headline added to the problems of that column. "In the heat of the moment, bad things can happen," he said. The expert skills of

experienced copy editors can be an important defense against that.

New York Times, Nick Bilton, Margaret Sullivan, wearable electronics, cell phones (media), precaution, Paul Brodeur, George Johnson, WiFi,

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