WEBWORTHY

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4371

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For those who may not quite get through all the mumbo-jumbo, gobbledygook, pseudo-scientific language with anything like meaning, Sokal claims that gravity and the eternal world are simply linguistic constructs and therefore not real. If you believe this for one minute, we’ll go test it atop a large building by jumping head first over the side. Mind you, first it reminds one of the argument that C.S. Lewis once had with an opponent who cried, “Therefore this podium is not real, the world is not real and our life is phantasmic,” or words to that effect. When Lewis stood up to rebut, he replied, “I would counter my opponent’s arguments, but it’s so unfair to do so when he’s not here to defend himself.”

What makes this story important, even critical when discussing peer-review is the now palpable possibility that even in the world of peer-review — an academy staple — what ends at the final product may in fact be worthless gibberish, tainted not only by partisan politics (from the left and the right) but vouchsafed by those who must, should and are paid to know better. (For more, see only Sokal and Bremont’s fashionable nonsense mentioned above, but also Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate’s The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America’s campuses [Free Press, 1998].) It means in effect that we have no real recourse to information that may not be jaundiced in some manner, and in ways that materially alter its intrinsic and extrinsic value.

For years I thought our only recourse was to rely on articles for which authors are paid, and by and large I still think that to be true. I find it hard to believe that a magazine would pay $250 and up for pure nonsense. But even these sources can be tainted, not so much by politics (though there is that possibility) but by finances; it’s now generally well-known that it was first to go in editorial departments when budget cuts came were the once famous fact checkers. Most magazines and publishers rely on authors policing themselves, and this reliance is hardly foolproof, as evidenced by Bell Laboratories’ Jan Hendrik Schon, a physicist touted for a Nobel Prize, who, as it turns out, fabricated much of his research.

So where does this leave us? It leaves us wanting in many ways. Wanting for reliable resources of information. Wanting for avenues that are trustworthy and irreplaceable. But there is also a silver lining: it leaves us knowing that librarians and libraries are without substitute in the quest for accurate, authentic and honorable information.

WEBWORTHY

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Weboworthy has reviewed 323 websites to date! Are you reading this Intro? If so, we’d like to know if you find this column useful! Email the editor at <pmrose@buffalo.edu> with your comments and any suggestions for improvement.

Websites are chosen for uniqueness, depth of information, functionality and ease of access. Sites are organized by broad subject area and are visited just prior to publication. Please let the editor know of any broken links.

Comments and suggestions welcome to Pamela M. Rose, Health Sciences Library, University at Buffalo, 3435 Main St., Buffalo, NY 14214-3002; 716-829-3900 x129; <pmrose@buffalo.edu>. Unless otherwise noted, Internet sites were also reviewed in Science’s NetWatch column. — PR

Integrated Pest Management

The health and environmental consequences of the continuing glut of chemicals used in pesticide applications are well documented. Scientists have developed alternative strategies known as Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which involves using natural enemies, altering harvest times, developing disease resistant crops, or interrupting the pest’s life cycle in some way. For example, tiny wasps have been used to control alfalfa weevils. Now entomologists Edward Radcliffe and William Hutchinson of the University of Minnesota offer an electronic textbook with over 60 chapters contributed by internationally known experts in IPM. It’s a work in progress, with continued on page 61

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a goal of hundreds of chapters from invited colleagues. — http://ipnworld.umn.edu/

Oral History
Seminal events in the long history of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratories, where many of biology’s top thinkers have studied, worked, or attended symposia, are recounted in this collection of oral histories. The video interviews from 51 scientists, including 3 Nobel laureates — Brenner, Horvitz, and Watson — include reminiscences of their time at the lab and the effect on their careers, as well as advice for aspiring scientists. Look for added entries on the Memory Board, where current and past visiting researchers can share their experiences. — http://library.cshl.edu/Off/mainMovie.html

Reference
Crop circles, bigfoot, iridology, and Amway — full analysis and descriptions of each of these pseudoscientific frauds, fads, and superstitions can be found at The Skeptic’s Dictionary compiled by philosophy professor Robert Carroll. A slightly different set of information can be purchased in print form by the same title. Begun in 1994, it has grown from 50 to over 400 entries, with many being translated into other languages. The site has several spin-offs, including The Skeptic’s Refuge for comments and reviews. — http://skepdic.com/

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