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Web Roundup: Marching for Science, which is what, exactly?

2017-04-30 01:42:34

By Lily Shapiro

Many of you may have marched (or chosen not to march) at last week's [March for Science](#). I marched with my partner and young son here in Coimbatore, India.

It's fair to say that confusion, controversy, and disagreement plagued the Science March from early on, for two important reasons: The first, from a group of scientists who believe the politicizing science (as if it is not already always political) will dilute its power (its "objectivity"). On the blog *addgene*, one scientist, [Stephanie Hays](#), explains why, amidst some controversy, she intended to march. While many anthropologists I know would take issue with her first sentence, "Science is an apolitical process for seeking knowledge," she goes on to detail why some are wary of the politicization of science but defends the need to establish that words like fact and truth mean something in the current political climate. Her post also contains a good reference list of other articles and posts on the march for science at the bottom.

An op-ed by Robert S. Young in *The New York Times* "[A Scientists' March on Washington is a Bad Idea.](#)" makes a similar argument. While Vox points out that "[Science is already political. So scientists might as well march.](#)"

The second (and, to my view, more interesting) set of controversies around the march have to do with pushback especially from scientists of color and allies who wanted to centralize concerns about the [lack of diversity](#) in science and STEM fields. Sociologist Zuleyka Zevallos has a long [blog post](#) on the various and contradictory statements from Science March leadership on diversity and inclusion. Her [Twitter](#) feed also has discussions on the status of diversity and inclusion in science in general and the organization of the science march more particularly. [Jacquelyn Gill](#) was an organizer who, dissatisfied with the leadership left the march and posted about her experience on Twitter. Many of these issues are covered in *Inverse*, "[Why the March for Science is in Turmoil](#)". Caroline Weinberg, one of the organizers, responds to some of these controversies in an interview in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#).

Sean Carroll in *The Atlantic* writes that we are “[Marching for the Right to be Wrong](#)”, which is a take I find compelling. And yet given that various fields (see for example [psychology](#), [oncology](#), [stem cell research](#)) have gone through “[reproducibility crises](#)” in the past 10 years, in which it turns out that a large percentage of experiments published in elite journals turn out *not* to be reproducible, are we sure that science is really that good at proving itself wrong? Several initiatives have come out in response to this, including the [Reproducibility Project](#). An offshoot of this project dealing specifically with cancer research has just released its [first results](#), which are “confusing.”

Speaking of ways that supposedly objective results are biased, an article in [The Guardian](#) summarizes findings published in *Science* that complex machine learning tools (including neural networks) show gender and racial bias, or rather, that these tools learn this bias because of the ways in which it is already encoded in human language. For example, these “findings suggest that algorithms have acquired the same biases that lead people (in the UK and US, at least) to match pleasant words and white faces in [implicit association tests](#).”

In thinking through how to respond to these and other ethical issues raised by computer science, Emma Pierson writes in *Wired*, “[Hey Computer Scientists, Stop Hating on the Humanities](#),” in which she argues that the complex ethical questions raised by new technology and its capabilities are not answerable by a training that focuses only on technical skills. “There are few things scarier than a scientist who can give an academic talk on how to shoot a human being but can’t reason about whether you should be shooting them at all.”

Lastly and only tangentially related, [The Atlantic](#) has a nice long article, “Torching the Modern-Day Library of Alexandria” on Google’s Google Book Search project, their attempt to scan every book in existence and upload them to the net. The article details the story of the germination of this project, how it became embroiled in litigation over obvious copyright infringements, how a settlement was *nearly* reached but then scrapped in large part by the efforts of academics, librarians, researchers and other book aficionados who were in favor of the project in principle (the principle of increasing access to mostly out-of-print and difficult to access books), but objected to Google being the sole holder of the keys. I understand their objection, but, like the author, think it’s a shame that, as he writes, “People have been trying to build a library like this for ages—to do so, they’ve said, would be to erect one of the great humanitarian artifacts of all time—and here we’ve done the work to make it real and we were about to give it to the world and now, instead, it’s 50 or 60 petabytes on disk, and the only people who can see it are half a dozen engineers on the project who happen to have access because they’re the ones responsible

for locking it up.”

Other snippets from the web that you shouldn't miss this month:

[The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black](#) in *The Stranger*

An article in [The New York Times](#) shows that subsidizing early childcare, especially for poor families, has enormous impacts on the income of mothers and the success of their children (and their children's children)—this effect is particularly evident in sons.

“[The United States of Work](#)” in *New Republic* reviews two recent books on wage labor in America.

AMA citation

Shapiro L. Web Roundup: Marching for Science, which is what, exactly?. *Somatosphere*. 2017. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13520>. Accessed April 30, 2017.

APA citation

Shapiro, Lily. (2017). *Web Roundup: Marching for Science, which is what, exactly?*. Retrieved April 30, 2017, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13520>

Chicago citation

Shapiro, Lily. 2017. Web Roundup: Marching for Science, which is what, exactly?. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13520> (accessed April 30, 2017).

Harvard citation

Shapiro, L 2017, *Web Roundup: Marching for Science, which is what, exactly?*, Somatosphere. Retrieved April 30, 2017, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13520>>

MLA citation

Shapiro, Lily. "Web Roundup: Marching for Science, which is what, exactly?." 30 Apr. 2017. *Somatosphere*. Accessed 30 Apr. 2017.<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13520>>