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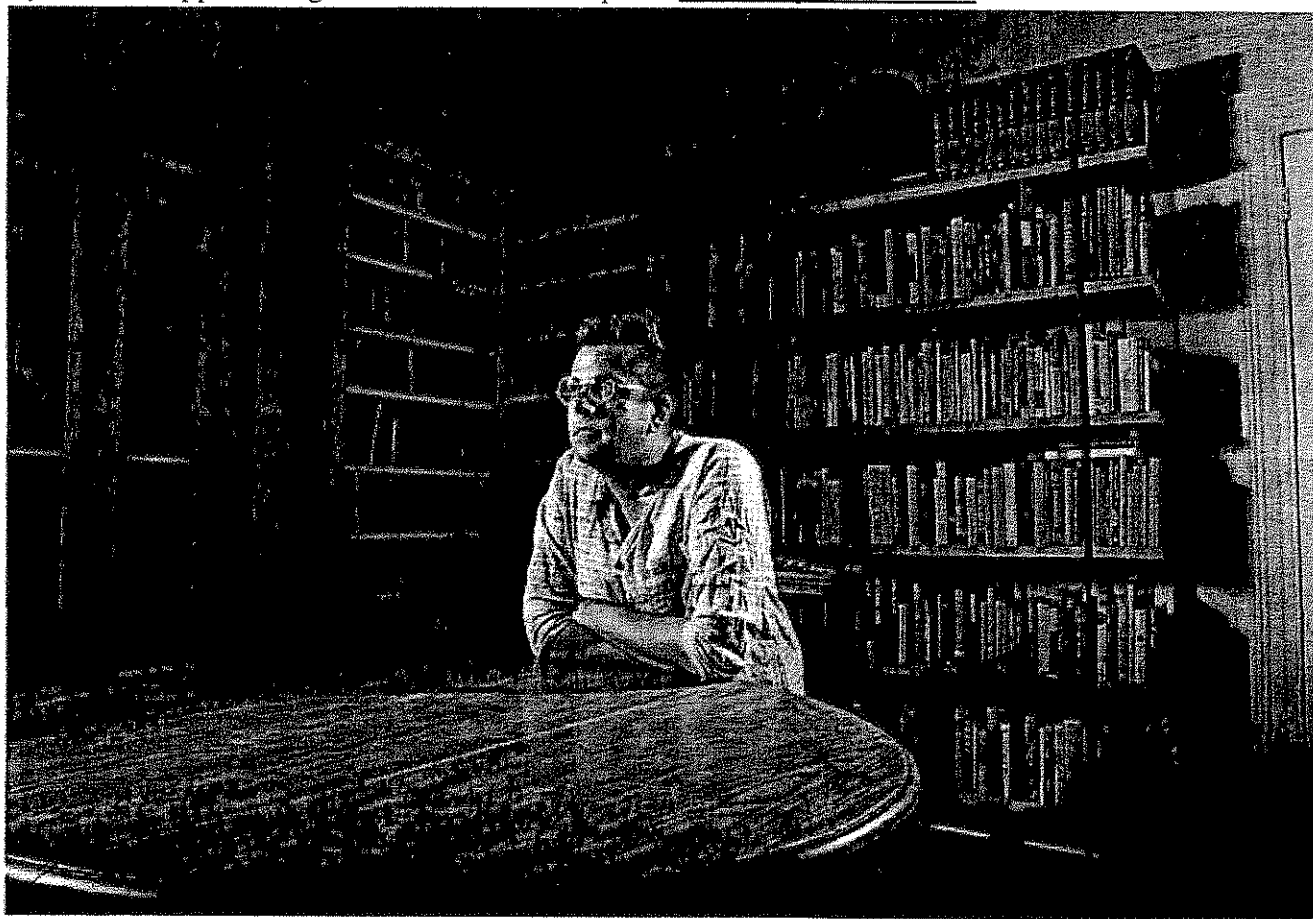
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18.09

## Author Simon Singh Puts Up a Fight in the War on Science

By Robert Capps ☒ August 30, 2010 | 12:00 pm | Wired September 2010



'You have to decide who you trust before you decide what to believe.'

Photo: Donald Milne

For a while there, things didn't look too good for British writer Simon Singh. The best-selling author of the science histories *Big Bang* and *Fermat's Enigma* knew he was heading into controversial territory when he switched tracks to cowrite a book investigating alternative medicine, *Trick or Treatment*? What Singh didn't count on, however, was that writing a seemingly innocuous article for

London's *The Guardian* newspaper about especially outrageous chiropractic claims—one of the subjects he researched for the book—would end up threatening his career. The British Chiropractic Association sued Singh, hoping to use Britain's draconian libel laws to force him to withdraw his statements and issue an apology. Losing the case would have cost Singh both his reputation and a substantial amount of his personal wealth. Such is the state of science, where sometimes even stating simple truths (like the fact that there's no reliable evidence chiropractic can alleviate asthma in children) can bring the wrath of the antiscience crowd. What the British chiropractors didn't count on, however, was Singh himself. Having earned a PhD from Cambridge for his work at the Swiss particle physics lab CERN, he wasn't about to back down from a scientific gunfight. Singh spent more than two years and well over \$200,000 of his own money battling the case in court, and this past April he finally prevailed. In the process, he became a hero to those challenging the pseudoscience surrounding everything from global warming to vaccines to evolution. It's not necessarily a role he sought for himself, but it's one he has embraced—he's currently touring the world, talking about his case, libel reform, and how important it is to make sure scientists can speak truthfully and openly. *Wired* spoke with Singh about his case and the struggle against the forces of irrationality.

**Wired:** The British Chiropractic Association wanted you to apologize for your Guardian article. Why didn't you? What would that have meant?

**Simon Singh:** It would have meant that whenever somebody typed "Simon Singh" into a Web search, it would say, "science journalist found guilty of libel." People could dismiss anything I'd ever written about alternative medicine. But more important, it would have implied that there is some validity to these claims that chiropractic can help with things like asthma and colic. And that would have an impact on parents and their children. Faced with that, I couldn't apologize. If you've written something that you believe is true, and if you can afford to defend it, then you've got to defend it.

**Wired:** Do you think that this is part of a broader trend? Is science under assault?

**Simon Singh:** What shocks me is people who have no expertise championing a view that runs counter to the mainstream scientific consensus. For example, we have a consensus amongst the best medical researchers in the world—the leading authorities and the World Health Organization—that vaccines are a good thing, and that MMR, the triple vaccine, is a really good thing. And yet there are people who are quite willing to challenge that consensus—film stars, celebrities, columnists—all of whom rely solely on the tiny little bit of science that seems to back up their view.

**Wired:** Yet the celebrities sometimes seem to be winning.

**Simon Singh:** Part of the problem is that if anybody has a gut reaction about an issue, they can go online and have it backed up. That said, they can also find support for their ideas in the mainstream media—because when the mainstream media gives a so-called balanced view, it's often misleading. The media thinks that because one side says climate change is real and dangerous, the other view is that it's not real and not dangerous. That doesn't reflect the fact that something like 98 percent of climate scientists agree that global warming is real and dangerous. And this happens with everything from genetically modified foods to evolution. But, at the end of the day, all that this misinformation does is slow progress—it doesn't stop it. Antiscientific and pseudoscientific attitudes will get corrected; it's just a question of how painful that process is going to be.

**Wired:** Should scientists do more to get real science out there?

**Simon Singh:** Scientists aren't necessarily good communicators, because they aren't trained to be good communicators. A researcher could be doing really important work on global warming, and then somebody writes a column in a national newspaper that completely undermines what they're saying. But the scientist doesn't think the column is important—it's just some nincompoop writing a column—so they don't take that writer to task in the way they should. It's a case of saying, "How do we make a difference?" We certainly don't make a difference by just moaning over coffee the next day.

**Wired:** What about nonscientists? How are we supposed to know what's true?

**Simon Singh:** Don't come up with a view, find everybody who agrees with it, and then say, "Look at this, I must be right." Start off by saying, "Who do I trust?" On global warming, for example, I happen to trust climate experts, world academies of science, Nobel laureates, and certain science journalists. You have to decide who you trust before you decide what to believe.

**Wired:** Why is it so hard to convince people, even when the science is so clear?

**Simon Singh:** Science has nothing to do with common sense. I believe it was Einstein who said that common sense is a set of prejudices we form by the age of 18. Inject somebody with some viruses and that's going to keep you from getting sick? That's not common sense. We evolved from single-cell organisms? That's not common sense. By driving my car I'm going to cook Earth? None of this is common sense. The commonsense view is what we're fighting against. So somehow you've got to move people away from that with these quite complicated scientific arguments based on even more complicated research. That's why it's such an uphill battle. People start off with a belief and a prejudice—we all do. And the job of science is to set that aside to get to the truth.

*Articles editor Robert Capps ([rcapps@wired.com](mailto:rcapps@wired.com)) wrote about the advantages of "good enough" technology in issue 17.09.*

211 

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