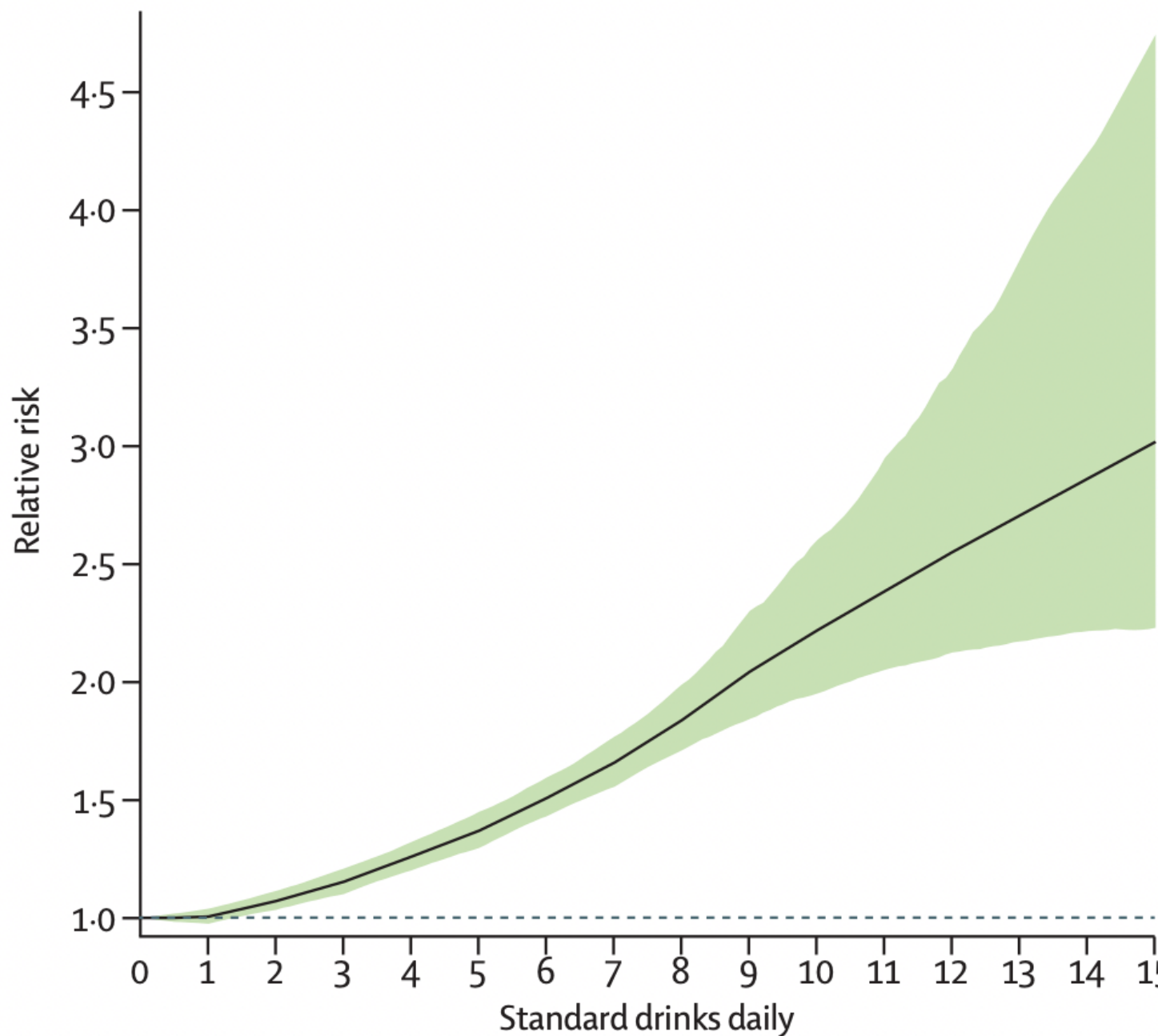


Viewpoint: 'Fashionable nonsense' — The deadly impact of 'kowtowing to academia's political zeitgeist' in biomedicine

In August 2018, The Lancet published a curious paper, reminiscent of America's long-forgotten Prohibition Era. The research came to a remarkable conclusion: There is no safe level of alcohol consumption.

Largely a product of the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (which recently sullied its reputation by promoting [wildly inaccurate COVID models](#)), the conclusion flew in the face of common sense and the scientific literature. Notably, it also contradicted the study's own data. Figure 5 from the [study](#), depicted below, clearly shows that there is no significant difference in health outcomes (measured in terms of relative risk on the y-axis) between people who do not drink at all and those who have one drink per day.



Credit: GBD 2016 Alcohol Collaborators, Lancet, 2018.

Why a research paper would come to a conclusion that is not supported by its own data would be puzzling were it not for the fact that the authors (to their credit?) stated their motivation up front: “These results suggest that alcohol control policies might need to be revised worldwide, refocusing on efforts to lower overall population-level consumption.” In other words, the authors are on a holy mission; whether the data support it is of secondary concern.

The *Lancet* study is indicative of a larger trend in scientific journals, namely, an increasing prevalence of

fashionable nonsense that is supported not by research but by ideology. Scientific journals are supposed to be the gatekeepers of objective facts, not cheerleaders for moral crusades or vogueish ideologies. Kowtowing to academia's political zeitgeist is not something that a medical journal — or *any* scholarly journal — ought to do. Yet, increasingly, that is exactly what they *are* doing. This is dangerous. And we can turn to a landmark book for some guidance as to why this is happening.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other 'disruptive' innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[SIGN UP](#)

Fashionable nonsense

In 1999, physicists Alan Sokal (of [Sokal hoax](#) fame) and Jean Bricmont published a book titled *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. Their thesis was that a portion of academia, generally within the humanities and social sciences, had adopted postmodernism, a philosophy that they defined as:

...an intellectual current characterized by the more-or-less explicit rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, by theoretical discourses disconnected from any empirical test, and by a cognitive and cultural relativism that regards science as nothing more than a 'narration,' a 'myth,' or a social construction among many others.

Using their definition, a good example of fashionable nonsense comes from self-help guru Deepak Chopra, who once wrote a book called *Quantum Healing* — a term that sounds erudite but is complete gibberish. The word "quantum" is often used in particle physics to refer to the minimum differences in energy levels, but it has no use in medicine. Combining the two is nonsense, akin to wowing an audience with a term like "gravitational genetics."

More than two decades after Sokal and Bricmont's book was published, the problem has grown exponentially worse. Instead of merely adopting the language of science improperly, postmodernism — whose [inherent indefinability](#) seems to be a feature rather than a bug — has invaded the scientific establishment itself. The "fashionable nonsense" that Sokal and Bricmont originally identified has mutated and grown to encapsulate a wide range of problems, from cynical bandwagoning to Orwellian changes to our vocabulary.

Orwellian medicine?

Playing fast and loose with public health data is hardly the only example of fashionable nonsense. Another worrying aspect is the policing of scientific vocabulary in ways that are confusing at best and perhaps Orwellian at worst.

On September 25 of this year, *The Lancet* published an issue that rightfully sought to bring attention to women's health, a topic that has a long and [inglorious past](#) due to the fact that, for millennia, medicine has

been dominated by men. The [cover](#), which consisted mostly of a blank white page, contained the following text: “Historically, the anatomy and physiology of bodies with vaginas have been neglected.”

THE LANCET

Volume 398 - Number 10306 - Pages 1105-1194 - September 25-October 1, 2021

www.thelancet.com

“Historically, the anatomy and
physiology of bodies with vaginas
have been neglected.”

See [Perspectives](#) page 1124

Credit: The Lancet (Sept. 25, 2021 issue)

The quote, which came from an [article](#) that still did use the word “women,” nonetheless triggered a firestorm. Critics contended that women were being “dehumanized” and reduced to body parts in a way that men never are. Nobody, for instance, refers to men as “bodies with penises.” The furor was bad enough that editor-in-chief Dr. Richard Horton felt compelled to release an [explanation and pseudo-apology](#).

In the statement, Horton explained that the quote was meant to be inclusive and a “compelling call to empower women, together with non-binary, trans, and intersex people who have experienced menstruation, and to address the myths and taboos that surround menstruation.” Inclusivity is a necessary

and admirable goal, as is dispelling taboos in regard to female physiology. However, this requires clarity of thought and wise communication. Refusing to spotlight “women’s health” when the apparent goal is to spotlight women’s health really misses the mark. It also undermines Horton’s [exhortation](#) that “serious issues [...] demand serious actions.” Under the circumstances, it is difficult to take *The Lancet* seriously, which thwarts its own goal. That is bad not just for *The Lancet* but for the entire biomedical community.

The deadly impact of fashionable nonsense

When Sokal and Bricmont wrote their book, the fashionable nonsense they lamented appeared largely limited to abuses by the humanities and social sciences. But this newer fashionable nonsense has infected other parts of campus, most notably public health. At the same time, the trend is increasingly threatening society as a whole. It is one thing to publish fashionable nonsense in an art history journal; it is a matter of life or death when it is published in a medical journal.

Why? Because public health officials use medical journals to guide decision-making. So do medical doctors. Journalists broadcast the conclusions of published research to the general public. And if the public comes to believe that it cannot trust medical journals on the easy stuff — like advice on alcohol consumption — then why would we expect people to trust them on anything, like the safety of MMR and COVID vaccines? The credibility problem facing the biomedical and public health establishment is, at least in part, a product of its own making.

[Read the original post here.](#)