

Why Salon Retracted My 2005 "Deadly Immunity" Article

Key Facts

- Salon removed my piece "Deadly Immunity" six years after its publication
- Salon cited no new factual mistakes to support its retraction
- Parroting CDC/Pharma talking points, Salon's Editor-at-Large, Joan Walsh, explained that Salon had lost faith in the science that links thimerosal to brain injuries
- Rolling Stone which co-published the article, found nothing of merit in Salon's explanation for its retraction and continues to stand by the piece
- Salon's Editor, Kerry Lauerman, suggested that he removed the piece to help launch a pro-CDC, pro-thimerosal book by Salon's in-house writer, Seth Mnookin
- The six original corrections to "Deadly Immunity" in 2005 redressed minor errors - mainly editing gaffs made by Salon and Rolling Stone. None of those errors were material to the article's central proposition
- Salon's founder and former Editor-in-Chief, David Talbot faults Salon for caving in to Big Pharma

In January 2011, Salon deleted my article "Deadly Immunity" from its website six years after its publication.¹ My critics have widely cited the Salon retraction to discredit me and the proposition that thimerosal is a potent neurotoxin that should not be in medicines. In recent weeks, newspaper editors and television producers have cited Salon's action as justification for their decision to not run my editorials, articles and letters to the editor or to allow me to talk about vaccine safety on the air. I now briefly review the history of Salon's withdrawal.

I published "Deadly Immunity" simultaneously in Rolling Stone and Salon online on June 16, 2005. The article laid out the scientific link between thimerosal and childhood neurological disorders and published, for the first time, explosive excerpts from the transcripts of CDC's secretive June 2000 Simpsonwood conference with vaccine makers and government public health officials. The transcripts revealed conference participants discussing an unpublished CDC study linking thimerosal exposure to brain injuries, including autism, and debating strategies for keeping the secret from the public. Both Salon and Rolling Stone scrupulously fact checked the article. The Simpsonwood transcripts are now available online so that any reader can directly verify the accuracy of my recounting.²

In the days following publication, government health agencies bombarded Salon and Rolling Stone with furious letters and the article came under unrelenting scrutiny.³ Salon and Rolling Stone corrected six minor errors. None of those errors were even remotely material to the article's central propositions. Four were minor clarifications or corrections of inadvertent editing or punctuation errors and one was a wrong name applied to a congressional staffer. The only error to rise above the level of trivial nitpicking was the assertion that a six-month-old infant could receive a level of mercury from vaccines that was 187 times EPA's limit for daily exposure. As the email record exchanges with editors from the time period confirm, that error, along with most of the others, was made by Rolling Stone and Salon editors as they cut my 16,000 word submission to 4,700 words.⁴

Under a barrage of criticism from the very government health regulators who had participated in Simpsonwood, Rolling Stone and Salon hastily corrected that calculation to state that the child would only receive a dose 40% greater than EPA's daily maximum safe exposure. I was on a wilderness trip at the time, so both publications printed the errata without consulting me. When I returned, I argued forcefully that this correction was deceptive and should not be allowed to stand. Although the original calculation was slightly off, it was far closer to the truth than the correction.

Here is why: the Environmental Protection Agency's guideline for mercury exposure is 0.1 micrograms per kilogram body weight per day. Using that guideline, the average 10 lb. two month old baby received 138 (not 187) times the EPA limit for mercury throughout the 1990's until approximately 2003/2004.

Incidentally, although 138 is considerably less than 187, the 187 number probably did not overstate the risk to the child. I say this because the EPA based its guideline on the risk of orally ingesting METHYL mercury which we know from the science is far less dangerous than injecting the far more toxic and persistent ETHYL mercury in vaccines. Furthermore, the neurotoxicity of ethylmercury is greatly amplified when combined with the aluminum adjuvant that is present in pediatric vaccines. Therefore, the real risks to the child would undoubtedly exceed the 187 magnifier. The danger, of course would be even higher for smaller babies.

To make matters worse, that same child, on its day of birth, at an average weight of 6 lbs., had already been exposed to 12.5 micrograms, or 46 times over the EPA guideline. At 4 months, weighing 14 lbs., the child received another 50 micrograms, which is 79 times over the EPA guideline and at 6 months, weighing 16 lbs., 62.5 micrograms, or 86 times over the EPA guideline. Finally, the 40% over figure that Salon used in its correction makes no sense whatsoever in relation to the EPA guideline. To this day, I'm not sure where they came up with that number. After two weeks of badgering by me, Salon and Rolling Stone issued a mangled clarification of their earlier correction that had introduced the forty-percent figure.

Six years later, Salon precipitously took down the piece on Sunday, January 16, 2011, during the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend. My only prior warning was an email from Salon's new editor, Kerry Lauerman, whom I had never met, sent the night before. In that email, Lauerman explained that Salon was timing its retraction of my article to accompany the launch of "Panic Virus," a new pro-thimerosal book by Salon's in-house essayist, Seth Mnookin. Lauerman's letter informed me that the retraction of my piece would accompany Salon's publication of an interview with Mnookin at noon the following day. In his introduction to that interview, Lauerman described Mnookin as a personal friend "and a friend of Salon's".⁵ Lauerman refused to take my calls protesting the retraction.

Neither Lauerman nor anyone else at Salon ever cited a factual error that caused Salon to remove my piece. Mnookin's book is a patently erroneous recitation of Pharma/CDC talking points. It is devoid of any serious scientific analysis. Mnookin simply insists that thimerosal is safe, and then engages a rather venomous pop-psychological screed against safe vaccine advocates. Mnookin's book criticized me for using quotes from the Simpsonwood transcript out of context, but the quotes he cites prove the opposite.

After reviewing Mnookin's book and Salon's strange explanations, mystified Rolling Stone editors elected to not remove the piece. Rolling Stone continues to stand by it today.

In a published note explaining the retraction, Salon's editor-at-large, Joan Walsh, never mentioned any new errors that Salon may have found in my piece. Instead, she parrots CDC's talking points that thimerosal is safe, citing "continued revelations of the flaws and even fraud tainting the science"⁶ linking thimerosal to neurological disorders. That vague proclamation serves as Salon's official rationale for defenestrating my article.

Salon's founder and former editor-in-chief, David Talbot, was likewise baffled and dismayed by Salon's actions. He explained his reaction in a letter to me on April 6, 2015:

I was dismayed when I first heard that Salon had removed your article about the hazards of thimerosal from its web archives. As you know, I was no longer the editor of Salon when your article was published. And I am not an expert on the subject. But without taking a position on mercury preservatives in vaccines, I know enough about the debate -- and about the pharmaceutical industry's general track record on putting profits before people, as well as the compromised nature of regulatory oversight in this country when it comes to powerful industries -- to know that "disappearing" your article was not the proper decision.

I founded Salon to be a fearless and independent publication -- one that was open to a wide range of views, particularly those that were controversial or contested within the mainstream media. Removing your article from the Salon archives was a violation of that spirit and

smacks of editorial cowardice. If I had been editor at the time, I would not have done so -- and I would have offered you the opportunity to debate your critics in Salon's pages.

In my day, Salon did not cave to pressure -- and we risked corporate media scorn, advertising boycotts, threats of FBI investigations by powerful members of Congress, and even bomb scares because of our rigorous independence. Throwing a writer to the wolves when the heat got too hot was never the Salon way. It pains me, now that I'm on the sidelines, to ever see Salon wilt in the face of such pressure."

¹ Correcting Our Record, by Kerry Lauerman, Salon.com, January 16, 2011
http://www.salon.com/2011/01/16/dangerous_immunity/

² Scientific Review of Vaccine Safety Datalink Information, June 7-8, 2000, Simpsonwood Retreat Center, Norcross, Georgia
<http://www.autismhelpforyou.com/HG%20IN%20VACCINES%20-%20Simpsonwood%20-%20Internet%20File.pdf>

³ Kennedy Report Sparks Controversy," by The Editors, Rolling Stone, July 14, 2005. Archived text of article is available in multiple locations online, incl.
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/vaccinations-deadly-immunity/14510> It originally appeared at the now dead link
http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7483530/kennedy_report_sparks_controv

⁴ On June 8, 2005, Rolling Stone and Salon editors wrote to my research assistant, Brendan DeMelle, to apologize for errors that they had introduced into the copy during the editing phase. "Some of these errors were ones we introduced, not Bobby," a Rolling Stone editor said. The Salon editor who worked on the piece extensively, Joan Walsh, repeated the apology and added further explanation to my staff: "some of these are OUR errors, not his. But in terms of PR and knowing why we changed things, I think this is helpful for him -- can you make sure he sees it? And Brendan, he said you'd caught some of these things, too...So we're all on the same page once we're doing publicity." By the time Salon retracted my article in 2011, Salon had clearly forgotten its own role in introducing errors and confusion in the drafting process.

⁵ Behind the Vaccine Panic," by Kerry Lauerman, Salon.com, January 16, 2011.
http://www.salon.com/2011/01/16/seth_mnockin_panic_virus_autism/

⁶ Correcting Our Record, by Kerry Lauerman, Salon.com, January 16, 2011
http://www.salon.com/2011/01/16/dangerous_immunity/

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