

## **My Response to the BuzzFeed Article of February 2018**

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On February 22, reporters from BuzzFeed published a libelous story defaming me specifically, and by association the skeptical and atheist community in general. To those friends, colleagues, and others who have written me kind notes of support, I want to thank you sincerely. To those who have expressed anger, I understand the disappointment you may have experienced upon reading the story. It has been very hard to remain silent thus far as my integrity and the integrity of the academic and skeptical communities, which I care about deeply, have been impugned. While it has gone against every grain of my nature not to immediately speak and write against falsehoods and distortions imposed upon the public, I have been advised by many individuals, wiser and more experienced than I in these matters, to wait until calmer heads, including my own, prevailed.

I should note that Arizona State University has placed me on paid administrative leave, as per normal procedure, while it reviews claims arising from the BuzzFeed article. I will inform the public of the results once that review is concluded.

In this statement I aim to address three questions: Was BuzzFeed's story accurate?, Does it accurately portray me?, and Did they do the community a service?

### **1. Was BuzzFeed accurate?**

#### **Developing the Narrative**

For over six months, reporters from BuzzFeed confronted me and others with one false allegation after another, including previously discredited Internet fabrications.

By December 2017, the reporters announced to me, ASU, and perhaps others, that they were publishing a story the next day. At that stage their narrative contained false claims and misrepresented information ASU had already provided to the reporters. After they received counter-evidence to those specific claims, a reporter stated they would not be publishing a piece at that time.

In January after they confronted my executive assistant at the workplace with a new false allegation, nearly driving her to tears, it became clear that a broader narrative was being constructed with cavalier disregard for evidence. Through their subsequent queries, the reporters demonstrated they were interested in portraying me as an example to impugn the skeptical and atheist communities as male dominated, sexist, harassing, and xenophobic. I was asked to comment on these issues: Why was I, or others I associate with, Islamophobic? How could I have the temerity to suggest that the movement was becoming more diverse? What did I think about the claims of female skeptics that they were constantly verbally harassed at meetings or in print, if not worse?

In mid February, they circulated new allegations they claimed were from anonymous former employees that impugned The Origins Project that I lead at ASU—complaints that had never been relayed to me, the employees’ supervisors, nor the university during the decade long history of the project. I finally contacted an attorney, who wrote a cease and desist letter to BuzzFeed on February 21 regarding their defamatory efforts. The next day, the BuzzFeed story appeared. In it, the reporters ignored counter-evidence, distorted the facts, and made absurd claims about me.

### **Ignoring counter-evidence**

- **Photo Request in Melbourne:** As BuzzFeed reported, a complaint was submitted to three universities by someone claiming to have witnessed me touch the breast of an unidentified woman during the taking of a selfie-photograph. The photograph did not itself did not show this, and the woman in the photograph has not submitted a complaint. Each university considered it independently; and each university concluded the claim was unsubstantiated. In response to BuzzFeed’s request for more information, ASU refused on the basis that to do so would further spread “defamatory statements.” BuzzFeed was also provided with findings of the Australian National University report dismissing the claim, which clearly revealed multiple inconsistencies in the emerging story of the claimant. Rather than reporting honestly on the doubts arising from these investigations about the validity of the allegations, the reporters instead focused their reporting on the words I used to try to bring those doubts to their attention.
- **Perimeter Institute:** A reporter from BuzzFeed informed me in February of an anonymous claim stating that I was forcibly removed from Perimeter Institute immediately following a sexual harassment complaint made at an event in 2009, and immediately banned from returning. I informed the reporter that each of these three claims was not true: I was not forcibly removed; I was not accused of sexual harassment; and I was not banned. The reporter then informed me that BuzzFeed was planning to publish information from an official at the Perimeter Institute who they stated was willing to go on record with those same three allegations. At that stage, I provided him with a copy of a March 2011 email to me from the Director of the Institute, saying “It was nice to have you at PI for the Q2C Festival and I do hope you’ll be able to visit again soon.” Rather than recognize that a source who had been willing to go on record with false information was likely not credible, BuzzFeed chose to publish a revised claim from the same source about my being banned from the Institute. Not surprisingly, that information is also, as I have been told, false.

My actual experience went as follows: I had been informed by a Perimeter official of a complaint from an unnamed staff member several days after the Q2C event in 2009. It involved what was described to me at the time as ‘inappropriate communication,’ and I was informed that I should not have any further communication with the employee and the matter was closed at that time. I sought clarification about the

basis of the complaint and about who I should avoid but was not provided with further details. For all I knew then, and now, I may have offended someone's religious sensibilities. Several years later, after numerous interactions and invites from colleagues at Perimeter, an outreach coordinator for Perimeter asked me to give another public lecture there. Following that, as the final details for the event were being planned, I received word from this individual indicating that he had heard about the complaint from a staff member and was rescinding the invitation to give the public talk. A few months later I met with the Perimeter Director and expressed my concerns, given that my understanding was that the matter was closed in 2009. I told him that if this was not the case, some official action would need to be taken to resolve the matter. He said he would look into it to determine if any action was required. Following that I received no more correspondence from Perimeter on this issue, although in the interim I have received numerous invitations from colleagues to attend scientific meetings there. In response to the BuzzFeed story I have requested that Perimeter clarify the situation.

- **Center for Inquiry Cruise:** BuzzFeed reported that my wife and I gave unwanted sexual attention to a guest on a CFI cruise in 2011. Recently I became aware that: (a) a staff member at CFI had heard a rumor sometime after the cruise; (b) a passenger was approached two years later for confirmation that she had received unwanted attention; and (c) at that time she indicated she did not want to press the issue. This reduces to a situation where there is an impasse of two different stories: that of my wife and I, who both maintain it did not happen; and that of an unidentified woman who is rumored to have told someone else about it 2011, and then expressed no interest in complaining when offered that opportunity in 2013. BuzzFeed also would have known that the CFI staff member who was most likely to have received the initial report had an intimate relationship with a source mentioned elsewhere in their story, who is highly critical of CFI, me, and the skeptical community. Reporters failed to reveal that obvious motivation for slander or other defamation.
- **American Atheists Convention, Iowa:** BuzzFeed included numerous quotes from an unnamed source who claims I touched her leg at a bar during this convention. What the reporters chose to omit from the story were any of the specifics or quotes from the lengthy detailed testimonial of Dr Robin Cornwell, then Executive Director of the Richard Dawkins Foundation, which was one of the groups coordinating the convention. Dr. Cornwell was the one who arranged the meeting at the bar with myself and several others from the Foundation. Dr. Cornwell made it clear to BuzzFeed that she had vivid recollections of the evening because at the time she was taken aback by the openly flirtatious behavior of a young woman who joined the group, her persistence in repeatedly inviting me to a hot tub, and her strong reaction to my rejection. Dr. Cornwell offered a detailed account of who was there, where they sat and how the conversation proceeded, including the overt nature of the woman's flirtation and my obvious discomfort. She also described to BuzzFeed her reaction months later when discovering a defamatory blog post about the incident,

which she brought to my attention. Rather than presenting a single detail of Dr. Cornwell's thorough eyewitness testimony that was completely counter to the claim they wanted to report, BuzzFeed merely stated that Dr. Cornwell was a friend who "backed [my] account."

- **Case Western Reserve University:** BuzzFeed reported on an occasion when a Dean at CWRU induced a student to submit a harassment complaint about discussions we had that made her feel patronized and uncomfortable. Since BuzzFeed also claims to have seen correspondence between the student and the administration, the reporters would have been aware that while the university wrote that the "behavior as alleged by the student could constitute a violation of the University's Sexual Harassment policy," following discussions with the student and myself, she, I and the university agreed to an informal resolution of the complaint. The information I provided CWRU and BuzzFeed included the following: I was surprised by the complaint because the student and I had many discussions about science communication in a variety of contexts. I had asked her on one occasion—I believe it was when she requested to accompany me to a BBC radio interview I was taping off campus—about whether it was difficult being the only woman in one of her physics classes and whether she was harassed at all. I meant it out of concern, as a former chair of the department, but apparently it was not taken that way. Also, one time she was interviewing me in my office and apparently I closed the door, which would not have been unusual since my office opened onto a coffee lounge for my research group and it was often noisy. While I do not recall, I apparently asked her if she wanted to get something to eat. Again, this was not unusual, as I often choose to agree to interviews over meals so I can kill two birds with one stone. I also often have meals or coffee with students, as do many of my colleagues. Moreover, because she had once asked if I would meet her off campus at a coffee house for an interview (I didn't go, not because I felt it was inappropriate, but because I didn't have time), I wouldn't have thought my request would make her uncomfortable. I had no inkling that it did until she later wrote about her concerns in a student paper. Moreover, there were interactions after the interview which gave no indication of discomfort. She had asked for a recommendation for a fellowship to attend a conference in Boston I was speaking at and I wrote one for her. There, she reached out to my wife and me and asked to share a taxi ride. She was quite outgoing and irreverent, both of which I encourage. That is why I was surprised to later learn of her article in the student paper complaining about the language I used. BuzzFeed misrepresented the context, the nature of the complaint and its resolution. They instead focused on CWRU's surprising directive almost 5 months later, after I had already left the University, for the Dean or Physics Chair to approve return visits. I did return various times over the following years to lecture or talk to colleagues.
- **Hotel Dinner Date:** BuzzFeed alleged a dinner date at a hotel in 2006 included a non-consensual physical encounter with Ms. Hensley. This is the most egregious of the BuzzFeed claims, and by its very nature the hardest to substantiate or dismiss, as episodes such as this ultimately devolve into an impasse of two conflicting personal

accounts. As I stated to the reporters, everything about the evening appeared to me to be a consensual, reciprocal, mutually enthusiastic, and respectful physical encounter concluding with a mutual decision not to proceed further toward sex. I recall that Ms. Hensley was happy to come to have a dinner date in my hotel room. Without getting into too much detail, I also vividly remember being playfully pinned to the bed by her at least once. The decision not to take it any further was mutual and discussed politely. We both did not feel comfortable about doing more than we did. As I also related to the reporters, my sense that the encounter was consensual was reinforced the following day when Ms. Hensley and I met for lunch and, following that, years later at the Reason Rally in Washington, D.C. where she welcomed me. I recently learned from CFI staff that Ms. Hensley had been happy about the possibility of introducing me at the event. While I want to emphasize that I understand that such shows of warmth are no guarantee that people have not experienced sexual harassment, my own recollections of the events and her behavior are all I have to go on.

- BuzzFeed wrote “our reporting is based on official university documents, emails, and interviews with more than 50 people.” That statement creates the inference that the article reflects denial by one man versus claims made by many others. It could lead the reader to the conclusion that over 50 people have supported their false and primarily anonymously sourced piece. A number of the people they contacted blind-copied me on their response, in which they repeated the refrain “that is not what happened” or “this is not how Lawrence behaves.” The story represents a series of largely anonymous hearsay claims against me that were countered by at least an equal number of presentations of counter-evidence by numerous individuals and two reputable academic institutions.

## False Innuendo

The second feature of the BuzzFeed article involved the systematic distortion of facts to present them in the worst possible light.

- After the BuzzFeed reporters repeatedly requested a statement from ASU about any claims of sexual harassment against me, ASU responded that there had been no such claims against me at the university by any students, staff, or faculty. When BuzzFeed asked for details of the external “claim” from Australia that they later published, the university informed them that claim had been deemed to be “defamatory” by the university and had been accordingly dismissed. ASU stated, “*we believe that disclosure of the communications would be re-publication of defamatory statements.*” Accordingly, I wrote to the reporters and characterized this result, combined with the findings of the ANU report, as implying the universities found the claim was fabricated with malicious intent. The reporters went to both universities and asked if they used that specific language, which they did not. One reporter wrote to me about that, and I reminded them that was my choice of words, because I took that to aptly describe the

combined findings. BuzzFeed used this linguistic difference to suggest I lied about the universities' findings rather than discuss the substance of those findings.

- The BuzzFeed article gives the impression that I left CWRU after the complaint and sought refuge at ASU. I did seek refuge of a sort at ASU, but because I viewed it as a much more exciting place to work, with more opportunities for exciting new programs. I had already accepted the ASU offer by the time I heard about the complaint at CWRU, and had already moved to ASU when I got the letter verifying it was being handled informally and the issue was closed. Moreover, after I announced my plans to move to ASU, the very Dean at CWRU who had encouraged the young woman to turn her student newspaper piece into a complaint nevertheless made me a very attractive counter-offer to stay at CWRU. After I turned it down, I was assured by both the Dean and President that if ASU wasn't all I had hoped, I would be welcome to return.
- The same distortion was used to describe my departure from ANU after the Australian complaint was dismissed by the university, making it seem like I was leaving in shame. In reality, I had accepted the visiting position there because my wife lived in Australia. But in 2014 she moved to the United States, so I visited much less. While the term of the visiting position was set to expire at the end of December last year, I had been planning to terminate it in the fall because by that time I hadn't visited in about a year. But once the complaint was lodged, I didn't want to terminate the appointment while the investigation of the complaint was ongoing. Afterwards, the Dean asked me to stay on till the end of my term, but I felt that unless I could be a regular visitor it didn't make sense to simply keep an honorific title I wasn't using.

### **Absurd claims:**

Three false allegations made by the reporters in the BuzzFeed story that don't focus on specific complainants are particularly disturbing to me, not because they are the most shocking or salacious, but because they are so deeply out of line with the way I think, write, and behave in general, as anyone who knows me or has watched me can attest.

First, they alleged that I stated to someone that maternity leave for women is unfair. I grew up in Canada, and also lived in Australia with my wife. Both countries provide sensible maternity leave policies that vastly exceed the unfair policies that are prevalent in the United States. My executive assistant, who has gone on maternity leave twice while in my employ, can attest that I was shocked when I found that she was provided only six weeks paid leave. In progressive countries, paid maternity or paternity leave is provided for far longer. I have often spoken about the need for more, not less, support for health and human services for women and men in this regard in the U.S. It is a despicable and gross mischaracterization of my strongly held and widely espoused views for the reporters at BuzzFeed to suggest otherwise. As I have mentioned, my executive assistant called me one day on the verge of tears after one of the BuzzFeed reporters cold-called her at work, claiming that a vague "someone" had said that I did not support her maternity leave in 2013, nor the practice of

breast pumping in the office. My assistant informed them that was untrue and that she had taken a subsequent maternity leave. The reporter pressed her about allegations that many women had claimed I was a harasser. She responded that in the 9 years she had worked as closely with me as anyone, she had never observed or been aware of any behavior akin to the behavior they described.

Second, BuzzFeed claimed that my statements suggesting the skeptical movement is becoming more diverse, and that it is a good time to be a woman in science, somehow reflected a reality colored by misogynistic and sexist glasses. Yet, anyone who attends skeptics conferences will have noticed that the programs and speakers have become far more diverse, a development I have vocally supported. And throughout my career I have watched and participated in efforts to increase diversity in the community of physicists. When I was chair of physics, we not only hired the first two women faculty in the physics department, we also matriculated what was probably the first all-female entering graduate physics class. In fact, it *is* a good time to be a woman in science, and I have pointed this out frequently when I lecture precisely because I believe this helps encourage young women who hear it to consider a career in science. Claiming that the whole discipline is anti-women merely serves to perpetuate the past, and defeats the purpose of those who claim they are trying to help.

Third, to return once more to the claim about the event in Australia, this strikes at the heart of who I am and who I try to be with members of the public. People who come up to me asking for selfies or autographs are vulnerable. I am particularly sensitive to that. They are often shy, sometimes shaking, sometimes crying. I go out of my way to make them feel welcome and respected at a time when they could otherwise easily feel humiliated. I believe my friends and colleagues who have witnessed this and any of the thousands of people who had taken such selfies can attest to how strongly I work to make people feel comfortable and at ease at an otherwise awkward moment. And while I have sometimes been groped or kissed by others during the process, I have treated even these people and situations gently and kindly and tried not to embarrass anyone.

## **2. Does the story accurately portray me?**

I am a Professor. My job is to teach, and create an environment for learning. I am by nature informal, even in formal circumstances. This has often held me in good stead, because it can create an atmosphere of open and mutually respectful communication. Nevertheless, my familiar way of communicating could also be misinterpreted as a lack of respect.

I am also brash and outspoken, sometimes obnoxious, in public and private. It is clear that there have been times when my statements, designed to provoke discussion, have made people feel intimidated, uncomfortable, or unwelcome to openly voice their concerns. I apologize to anyone I made feel this way and I hope that those who interact with me in the future will feel free to speak out to let me know immediately if my remarks seem so. My chief priority in my own communications is and will be to create and maintain a safe atmosphere for open dialogue on any matter and to provoke that dialogue.

I am outgoing, friendly and joke with people during social occasions. My intentions have never been to demean anyone, objectify them, diminish their sense of self-worth, or discourage them from expressing themselves. For any occasion where my friendly and open demeanor caused discomfort, I apologize for my lack of sensitivity. It was certainly not my intention.

I understand that there are many legitimate reasons why people may feel unable to speak out in uncomfortable situations due to social, professional or power dynamics. It is very important to me that people are able to speak openly with me whether or not my remarks seem inappropriate in any way.

I have been teaching, writing, and speaking publicly for over 30 years. BuzzFeed has described two instances in which my language was interpreted as inappropriate. This does reflect that some people are upset enough by my language to express concerns to someone other than me directly. It concerns me that there have been any such cases. I have tried to create an atmosphere around me where people are treated as equals, and where transparent discussion can take place. These two cases show that this has not always been the case. I deeply regret this. I will put more conscious effort into appropriately expressing myself and more accurately gauging and responding to the reactions and sensitivities of others.

### **3. Did BuzzFeed do the community a service?**

There are a variety of reasons that I believe the answer to this question is no. First, sexual harassment, and indeed any form of harassment, is a serious offense by its very nature. But that nature needs to be carefully defined, and it certainly wasn't in the BuzzFeed article. By blasé conflation of harassment with, say, a proposition—independent of whether or not it actually occurred—BuzzFeed is promoting an atmosphere of accusation and victimhood that in the present time does a disservice to everyone, and in particular to the victims of sexual harassment or assault.

Next, turning to communication issues, where at times I have undoubtedly been clumsy or not tactful in my own attempts, we need to encourage an atmosphere of honest and reciprocal dialogue between men and women, not discourage it. Of course, no topic is worth making people feel uncomfortable enough that they cannot voice their concerns. But honest and respectful conversation is a two-way street, with individuals being free to respond to each other if they are offended or uncomfortable. I realize it is important that I try to be more sensitive to the feelings of others, and the current movement makes clear that my sensitivity, like many others', can be improved.

There are nevertheless a host of situations where people are not free to speak up, either because of an employer-employee or teacher-student power relationship, or due to the perception of physical threats. On the other hand, an atmosphere that one individual may



assume is open and safe may at the same time be viewed as intimidating by another. These are different sorts of problems we need to work together to solve, in different ways. The latter instance provides an opportunity for encouraging reciprocal dialogue in real time, based on the recognition that doing so is a service to both parties. Otherwise the opportunity to potentially diffuse discomfort for one, and improve sensibilities for another, is lost.

## **Conclusions:**

Has my language or demeanor sometimes made others feel uncomfortable? Clearly yes, and for that I sincerely apologize.

Nevertheless, the BuzzFeed article effectively paints a false picture of me and my relationships with others through a mosaic constructed largely out of anonymous hearsay and a web of often vague innuendo. Moreover it is hard to accept that any journalists would send letters to their target's employers and professional relationships, wherein instead of asking "What are the facts?" they ask instead, "How could so many others' claims be wrong?" after alleging a plethora of unspecified crimes of sexual harassment.

In the current climate, I recognize it is virtually impossible to undo the impact of allegations, true or false, once they have been made public. But if I am to argue that it is important to engage in dialogue, I also need to respond to the claims against me and others that I find false and inappropriate, and to present what I view as an accurate portrayal of facts, reliance on evidence, and respect for the community.

My prime purpose of this lengthy statement has been to present the facts as I understand them, and explain why the allegations presented by the reporters at BuzzFeed are not credible and do not accurately convey me or my interactions with others.

I do not know to what extent my professional efforts will be permanently damaged by this experience, especially in light of the current climate of suspicion and distrust. I am particularly saddened to think that people I might have once inspired and helped may now feel betrayed or jaded, and that others who might one day be inspired by my contributions may no longer be open to such a possibility. But I am not going to let a libelous article stop me from trying to continue my work, and to maximize my positive impacts. I will continue to try to defend science and reason against attacks emanating from those with any ideological or religious agenda. I will continue to try to reach out to young people and old alike, to help excite them about the universe, and to encourage them to think critically about it. I will continue to try to interact more effectively with others, regardless of their age, gender, or professional stature, with warmth and mutual respect.

I am sorry to those who felt betrayed by what they read in the BuzzFeed article, but I also urge you to think critically about the content of the article, the context in which it was written, the manner in which it was written, the evidence that was not presented, and the agenda that appeared to drive those who wrote it.