

The Case for the Formation of a “Scientists’ and Engineers’ Anti-Defamation League”

or

In the movies and on TV, why do scientists and engineers always get the ugly member of the opposite sex?

These days it seems that just about every ethnic, religious, professional, or other identifiable group has some kind of organization that zealously guards and protects it from stereotyping, prejudice, and the general creation of negative images—every group, that is, except us: the scientists and engineers of the world. Where is our “anti-defamation league”? Who is looking out for our image and protecting us from being portrayed in an unfavorable, negative, or even worse light? Certainly not our plethora of professional societies. They are too busy organizing meetings and fora for the general and unrestricted dissemination of scientific information. (OK, admittedly some of these occasionally take place in very desirable venues—so let’s give credit where credit is due!) They are too busy publishing scholarly journals, conference proceedings, books, and somewhat less scholarly magazines and generally carrying out various and sundry other endeavors. In the midst of pursuing all of these multifaceted and demanding activities, while trying to maintain financial solvency in the process, our scientific and engineering societies simply don’t have the time to worry about how frequently the media go out of their way to make us look bad. Additionally and in any case, they probably lack the resources to fight back effectively in the face of such powerful, influential, and pervasive forces.

The images promulgated by today’s media almost universally divide scientists and engineers into two main categories. In Category A, we are depicted as oddballs, weirdos, geeks, nerds, or some other slang-type of uncool and undesirable person (i.e., as creepy individuals that “normal” people simply can’t understand or don’t feel comfortable being around regardless of their ability to do integration by parts.) Scientists and engineers are frequently shown on TV (even in some commercials where they are ostensibly trying to sell something) and in the movies wearing stereotypical large-framed black glasses. (OK, believe it or not, but without the white adhesive tape on the nosepiece, these actually were cool in the 1950s.) In earlier days, there was always the obligatory slide rule hanging from a belt or protruding from a pocket protector, but providentially,

these are gone now—many people don’t know what they are or even what they did. In the media’s treatment of this first group, at the end of the story and regardless of their gender, its members always wind up with a partner that is another stereotyped “undesirable” (if they wind up with anyone at all—having previously lost out to the hero or heroine, who is always depicted in a very different and extremely favorable light!).

The members of Category A are always unkempt—shirttails hanging half out, uncombed frizzy and Einstein-like hair, sagging, ill-fitting and out-of-style (although these days, who can tell?) clothes, etc. One of the really unfortunate consequences of this widespread stereotypical portrayal (at least in my personal opinion) is that it can actually motivate some scientists and engineers to an affectation and emulation of this kind of media-promoted persona. Perhaps some people think that it makes them really look like a scientist or engineer or that it makes them smarter. If the latter is the motivation, then in my experience, this is really just not working at all.

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In Category B, the scientists and engineers are revealed to be vile and evil sociopaths whose greed, lust, and just plain old-fashioned cruelty threaten both the civilized and uncivilized world. (Heh, these guys don’t care one way or the other—they make no distinction!) To make matters even worse, the media persona of these scientists and engineers is often enhanced through the addition of some physical deformity or disability—like, they don’t have any legs and are propelled around by some incredibly complex device with more features than a fully loaded Infinity Q45 and more weaponry than a Black Hawk helicopter. They may have some terrible scar that is hidden by a not-much-more-attractive (but always functional in some disgusting

way) prosthetic appendage. No matter how terrible their physical state is, however, one is never allowed to feel any sympathy for them. Often, it is not so clear or easy to divine from the plot of the story what is actually driving these scientist/engineer techno-fiends to go out and invent a device that is automatically going to annihilate the entire known world unless the hero or heroine disarms it at the last second. Frequently, however, there are hints that it was perhaps a childhood incident involving Play-Doh or maybe an unanticipated early IRS audit that actually lies at the root of their determination to wipe out every bloody living creature on the whole planet—you know, really credible and believable motivation! As opposed to the scientists and engineers depicted in Category A, these villains invariably wear some incredibly cool outfits (bizarre, admittedly, but cool). Additionally, and at least until they are justifiably totally destroyed, Category B scientist and engineer fiends always enjoy the company of some really stunning companionship. What is the moral message here? Is it, “crime can pay—but only for a little while?” (Clearly, recent news from the business world provides some evidence that this can actually be the case!)

As scientists and engineers, aren’t we finally, once and for all, fed up with these negative and very unflattering depictions of us in the mass media? Don’t we need our own organization to monitor the media and protect and polish our image? Is it possible that these unflattering widespread media depictions have, in some way, a sinister subliminal effect on our research funding? What a terrifying thought! So why can’t we have our own “Scientists’ and Engineers’ Anti-Defamation League”? Sure, part of that name is already taken, so we have to come up with some new and totally original name—like maybe the “Image Enhancement and Anti-Prejudice League of Women and Men Scientists and Engineers.” Hmm, probably that may not be the best name either—but at least it’s a start!

I was asked to write three POSTERMINARIES and this is the third. Elton Kaufmann has written many of these, and I would like to acknowledge the inspiration of his early writings that led to my origination of the word “giantmagnanopersistence” that appeared in a previous column.

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