

THE BACKSTORY OF THE AA'S PETITION

AND HOW TWITTER-CHUMS STICK TOGETHER

WHEN THE BEEB MAKES A BOOB

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For those who are unaware of the reasons for the Astrological Association of Great Britain's petition, and the sequence of events that led to the recent Guardian-online anti-astrology debate,¹ the back-story to this situation is that Professor Brian Cox has frequently used his role as a media-presenter of astronomy programs to declare it is a "fact that astrology is rubbish".² The Astrological Association (AA) submitted a formal complaint to the BBC last year, after the BBC2 TV programme *Wonders of the Solar System* was used as a gratuitous opportunity for Brian Cox to make this declaration. The AA's complaint, along with many others, was to seek balanced and appropriate representation of astrology if it is to be featured in programmes on the BBC.

Beyond this, despite this complaint being ongoing, when Professor Brian Cox presented the BBC2 astronomy programme *Stargazers Live* on 3rd January 2011, accompanied by TV celebrity Dara O'Briain (a comedian who has also studied physics and has a general interest in science and astronomy) the pair used a discussion on planetary movement to contrive an assertion, repeated and emphasised several times (to make it clear "once and for all") that astrology is nonsense and rubbish. Dara O'Briain referred to a misleading visual demonstration of a planetary line-up in order to supposedly demonstrate that horoscopes are all nonsense *because* "only the Earth goes round [the Sun] in one year, and comes back to the same spot". The dialogue continued thus:

¹ The initial article that led to intense debate, by Martin Robbins, was entitled "Astrologers Angered by Stars" (the word 'stars' referring to the celebrity status of Brian Cox and Dara O'Briain). It can be viewed at www.guardian.co.uk/science/the-lay-scientist/2011/jan/24/1

A follow up article which extended the debate was written by Rebekah Higgitt, entitled "Should we debunk astrologers more respectfully?"; this can be viewed at www.guardian.co.uk/science/the-lay-scientist/2011/jan/28/1

² The remark can be viewed as repeated within Brian Cox's 2010 Huw Wheldon Lecture, the pertinent extract of which is contained within the Youtube footage link given in footnote 9.

O'Briain: "horoscopes: that's all nonsense. We're happy to say this now, once and for all, that's all rubbish, right - astrology; because the planets are in different places at different times!".

Cox: "In the interests of balance, because we're on the BBC, I should say that, indeed, Dara is right"

O'Briain: "It's nonsense, it's absolutely nonsense."³

This incorrect and far-fetched analogy left viewers with the false understanding that the astronomy used in astrology has an unreliable basis (whilst implying that astrologers do not understand even the basic principles of how the solar system works). The derisory exchange also made it transparent that the BBC are not taking seriously the earlier complaint from the AA about their responsibility to give to the subject of astrology the same degree of fair and accurate reporting as they would expect to commit to any other subject.

In response to this concern that its complaints were not receiving due consideration, the AA then set up a petition by which anyone who is opposed to the repetitive derogation and misrepresentation of astrology on TV programmes could demonstrate support for its request that the BBC gives fair and unprejudiced consideration to its complaint, (which seeks a public apology for the misrepresentation of information with a public announcement that they do not support the views of Brian Cox or Dara O'Briain). The petition was placed online on 16th January 2011.⁴

I had also written my own independent report on this situation, published the previous day, demonstrating how the astrological community is increasingly frustrated by media misreporting on our astronomical awareness (such as this and the 'Ophiuchus: 13th-sign' controversy which gained attention the same month due to sensationalist reporting of a US astronomer's suggestion that there should be 13 signs of the zodiac instead of 12).⁵ Because that article had picked up on some of the points that were relevant to the AA's complaint; the AA chose to link to the article from their

³ Transcript based on a video excerpt of the programme made available for review purposes at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=072EJnVQInA>.

⁴ <http://www.astrologicalassociation.com/pages/bbc/submit.php>

⁵ <http://www.skyscript.co.uk/13thsign.html> - the reason why the apparent suggestion (distorted through poor reporting) and not the astronomy behind astrological technique is ridiculous, is contained within that article. Since the so-called '13th-sign' referred to the overlap of the feet of the constellation Ophiuchus over the ecliptic, the two current media controversies were tied together under the heading "Ophiuchus puts his foot in it; but it's Cox who sticks the Boot in".

petition page, and I then placed return links around the article advising astrologers to support the petition if they were concerned about the issues raised in my article.

On 21st January 2011, upon discovering that the AA had initiated a petition to support its complaint, one of the presenters of the *Stargazer's Live* program, Dara O'Briain (whose comments were part of the complaint), used his public Twitter feed to entice his 300,000 Twitter-followers to sabotage the petition, encouraging them to make spurious entries of names and email details such as "First name: Astrologyis, Second name: Myarse", and declaring that he had signed it himself as "Mr Astrology Isbunkum at getoverit@getalife.com" (both comments were published on 21 January). From this point in time there was a torrent of spurious entries into the AA's petition database (they total over 1000), some of which contained very hostile messages presented in the form of names and email addresses.

Also on the same day, one of Dara O'Briain's Twitter-followers, Martin J. Robbins (the Guardian's 'Lay Scientist' editor) forwarded this comment in his own public Twitter feed: "Heh, the Astrological Association are pissed off @ProfBrianCox again <http://bit.ly/ihJ6DN>" (the link led through to the page of the AA petition).

Mr Robbins then subsequently wrote an anti-astrology report for Guardian-online, "Astrologers Angered by Stars", which was published on January 24th, with the aim of recommending readers to urge the BBC not to listen to the petition. It concluded with the comment:

I very much doubt the BBC are going to listen to this petition, but just in case, I say we start our own little petition here - if you agree with Brian Cox and Dara O'Briain (and let's face it, reality) that "*astrology is a load of rubbish*", feel free to leave a comment below supporting the BBC's stance. If I get more than a few, I'll put them in a letter and pass it on to the Beeb myself.

Meanwhile, on the 22nd January, the day after Dara O'Briain had released his Twitter-feed enticement to spoil the petition, Professor Brian Cox gave his own public endorsement to the sabotage by retweeting to his own Twitter-followers Dara O'Briain's announcement of having signed the petition as "Mr Astrology is Bunkum". He also publicly retweeted a subsequent message which gave a link to an image which had been placed online as a visual demonstration of someone having sabotaged the petition along the lines of Dara O'Briain's suggestion (<http://twitpic.com/3s3wjw>: the

relevant image is shown below).⁶ The Twitter records shows that this message was tweeted by '100+ others' and shortly after this, the volunteer who runs the AA's website became the target of a cyber attack upon a private academic email address, which was repetitively used as the supposed submission email for hundreds of petition entries submitted under the name "Brian Cox". This does not, of course, suggest that Brian Cox had any personal involvement in this situation, other than his apparent Twitter-feed endorsement of the principle of it. The public behaviour of the program presenters have however served to stimulate the collective expressions of hostility, the invasion of privacy, and many deliberate attempts to sabotage the petition and to impede the AA and its members and supporters in their right to hold a peaceful and legitimate expression of democracy and to have its complaint against misrepresentation considered fairly and appropriately.



The online image that Professor Brian Cox RT'd to his Twitter Followers

In the Guardian-online debates that followed the publication of Martin Robbins' anti-astrology article,⁷ contributors who were defending astrology repeatedly tried to reassure members of the scientific community that we hold complete respect for modern science and its researchers and practitioners at all levels, and that our interests do not essentially conflict with theirs; nor do we desire or demand coverage on TV

⁶ Prof. Brian Cox's public Twitter posts are available for viewing at <http://twitter.com/#!/profbriancox>; Dara O'Briain's at <http://twitter.com/#!/daraobriain>.

⁷ Martin Robbins article was heavily biased against astrology and very lazily researched. It gave no explanation of why astrologers had a complaint; nor did the author make attempts to speak to astrologers to try to discover what the issues were. It merely drew a comment from my '13th sign' article on the Skyscript site which the AA's petition page had linked to; and cut its quoted text in a place where the astrologer quoted would look ridiculous instead of justified in her complaint concerning the BBC's broadcast comments. As well as the misrepresentation of our position, the report also gave a false account of astrology's standing in history – these inaccuracies were largely corrected by the follow up article of his Guest blogger Dr Rebekah Higgitt, although by the time her more reasonable and informed article appeared, the anti-astrology contributors were in no mood to give serious attention to her calm and balanced opinions.

science programmes (or any programme except to redress misrepresentation), or expect our subject to be categorised as a modern science; but only wish that when the subject of astrology *is* given coverage in the media that the coverage is fair, balanced and truly reflective of the deep, studious and complex nature of the subject.

As the Guardian-online debate was nearing its close last week, on February 2nd, Brian Cox was interviewed on a BBC5 radio show and asked about the controversy his anti-astrology comments had stirred. In this programme he tried to suggest that he hadn't really said anything offensive about astrology himself, and he also tried to leave the impression that he was genuinely surprised to discover that the subject is regarded as more than just TV entertainment by some, and to discover that there are people who really do believe in it and practice it professionally (whilst adding that he thinks they should "stop whingeing really").⁸

However, the extent to which Brian Cox is acutely aware of the professional standards of astrologers, and fully aware of the sincerity of the complaints that the BBC receives about his anti-astrology comments, can be evidenced by the following extracted transcript from his Brian Cox's delivery of the 2010 Royal Television Society's Huw Wheldon Lecture, screened on BBC2 on 1st Dec 2010:⁹

...with television, there are customers, viewers, reviewers, consumers - so television must reflect, to an extent, the majority and minority views of the population. But what if the majority of the population doesn't share the scientific view? What if the findings of science run contrary to deeply held beliefs? What if the accepted scientific position might offend some viewers?

Let me give two examples, one of which is trivial and doesn't matter at all, and one that matters a great deal.

The first comes from my own series, *Wonders of the Solar System*, in which an off-hand but factually correct comment about Astrology triggered a bit of a spat between myself, some of our more mystical viewers and the BBC.

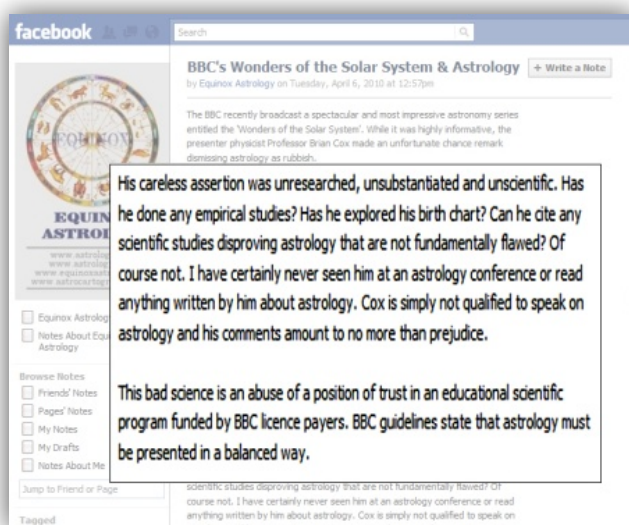
⁸ The broadcast is available on BBC iplayer until Feb 10th: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00y209d> 00:07:45 (comments appear around 38th min podcast version). A transcript of the relevant text is available at <http://cid-98bdfbbf162a436d.office.live.com/self.aspx/.Documents/Transcript%20Daily%20Bacon%20Segment.rtf>.

⁹ 'Science: A Challenge to TV Orthodoxy': Royal Television Society Huw Wheldon Lecture 2010 by Professor Brian Cox, OBE. Lecture commenced at 7:30pm, 26 Nov 2010, Lowry Theatre, Salford Quays. Transmitted: 1st Dec 2010, BBC2, 11:20pm. The televised lecture is available on YouTube (extract begins in the 8th minute): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hd0vW5wPjIQ>.

Shows video clip from the BBC's *Wonders of the Solar System* where he refers to the "fact" that "astrology is a load of rubbish". Adopts exaggerated and mocking tone:

Now that (not surprisingly) triggered various outbursts all over the web and directly to the BBC Complaints Department, including this particular whinge on an astrology Facebook group that decided to fly the flag for the irrational community and spearhead the fight against reason. It said:

Shows graphic from Equinox Astrology Facebook page, and reads comment aloud¹⁰



"His careless assertion was unresearched, unsubstantiated and unscientific. Has he done any empirical studies? Has he explored his birth chart? ... I have certainly never seen him at an astrology conference [Cox interjects: 'fortunately ... for me!'] or read anything written by him about astrology.

This bad science is an abuse of a position of trust in an educational scientific programme funded by BBC licence payers. BBC guidelines state that astrology must be presented in a balanced way."

A visual which is similar in style to the one shown in Professor Brian Cox's Huw Wheldon Lecture; however the graphic above shows the text actually published on the website. Compare with Cox's (unacknowledged) editing of the quote as it was shown to the audience and read out by him, lacking some of the weightier points of the original criticism.

That isn't, by the way, correct. The BBC's Editorial Guidelines, fortunately, say no such thing! But how to deal with this? The BBC asked me for a statement – mine was, "I apologise to the Astrology community for not making myself clear. I should have said that this New Age drivel is undermining the very fabric of our civilization."

This wasn't issued by the BBC Complaints Department. Instead, they said that, "the Professor's comments were his own, not those of the BBC and were based on his belief that there isn't sufficient evidence to support Astrology".

Now this is a perfectly reasonable response (on the surface) – in fact you could argue that it is correct, because a

¹⁰ The Equinox Astrology Facebook note page is online at: <http://www.facebook.com/notes/equinox-astrology/bbcs-wonders-of-the-solar-system-astrology/384769273320>. The graphic shown is my own, reproduced to mimic the look of the original image.

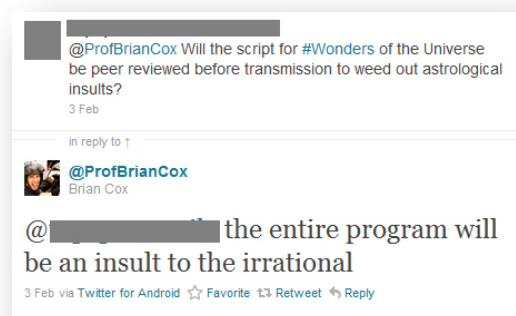
broadcaster shouldn't have a view about a "faith" issue, which is essentially what Astrology is. The presenter can have a view, and I was allowed to have one. What I did was present the scientific consensus.

I think, however, that there are potential problems with broadcasters assuming a totally neutral position in matters such as this – not in particularly trivial cases like my spat with astrologers where it is clear that discretion is perhaps the better part of valour – but in areas of real import. This illustrates a real point of friction between the scientific view and the imperative for the broadcaster to remain impartial, whilst allowing the presenter or programme-maker to offer a "view".

So it is clear that Brian Cox was fully aware of the history of strenuous attempts to correct his unfounded criticisms before the airing of *Stargazing Live*. Brian Cox is also fully aware that astrologers are deeply committed professionals, practitioners, students and enthusiasts, who take the subject seriously and work hard to understand it properly (being not simply 'TV entertainers'). Brian Cox is also aware that our complaints concern a lack of professional integrity, lack of objectivity, lack of research, and lack of respect for honest and reliable information on his part. Our complaints also express our concern that the BBC is failing in its duty to be a responsible broadcaster by allowing comments which constitute deliberate misrepresentation, and more importantly discrimination and prejudice, to go unchecked.

Nor does it seem that Brian Cox has any intention of ceasing the broadcast of his ill-founded comments. Far from it. A new series of *Wonders of the Universe* is due to be screened by the BBC in early March, 2011. Brian Cox, upon being asked by a member of his Twitter-following "will the script for the upcoming series of Wonders of the Universe be peer-reviewed before transmission to weed out astrological insults?" issued a public reply to the question which stated

"@[poster] the entire program will be an insult to the irrational" (3rd Feb).



Since, as Professor Brian Cox knows, no one can claim to have an absolute knowledge of the meaning, purpose and mysteries of life; nor even an absolute knowledge of the physical workings of the cosmos, we can only hope he understands that what he considers to be “irrational” is largely determined by his own personal opinion, and what seems to be his own irrational fear that astrology will destroy the fabric of civilization (rather than simply appreciating that its principles are woven into the *foundation* of civilisation and the development of traditional science, the shoulders of which support his own area of expertise).

In fact, Professor Brian Cox needs to be aware that one of the strengths of astrology is that it has a strong underlying rationale, which has been clearly and logically argued by some of the greatest names in the history of science (such as Ptolemy) which is the reason why the subject held such an important role in the history of science for as long as it did. Although the demands, interests and perspectives of modern science has changed, the logical rationale that supports astrology has never been weakened or disproved. We can only hope therefore that Professor Brian Cox realises that his role as a presenter of fact-based information on astronomy is best spent offering explanations on his own area of expertise, rather than creating gratuitous opportunities to discriminate against other systems of knowledge that he has not studied or obtained any substantial understanding of himself. And we can only hope that at some stage the BBC will demonstrate due concern for its editorial guidelines, which most certainly *are* being broken, despite Professor Brian Cox’s public assertion that they are not.¹¹

About the author: Deborah Houlding

My involvement in this situation is independent of the AA, and I am not a member of their council. I did not support the AA’s original complaint, believing that the remark attracted more attention than it deserved. I do support them now that the insults have become habitual, and I have written my own letter of complaint to the BBC.

The astrology website that I run, skyscript.co.uk, was pulled into controversy in the Guardian-online debate due to Martin Robbins’ article featuring a prominent link to the site and quoting from its content. Critical attacks were then made against myself and Skyscript from the anti-astrology posters, so for the record the Skyscript site is not commercially driven; it is developed purely by myself in my spare time; I do not advertise my astrology services on it; nor do any contributors receive payment for content provided. My personal website is at www.debholding.co.uk.

Recently, news has been released that the Supreme Court of India has ruled astrology to be defined as a ‘trusted science’ (*i.e.*, body of knowledge). I wrote an article¹² which compared this respectful attitude against the BBC’s disrespectful one, and as a reference I committed to giving an account of what I had observed as a result of my own involvement. This is that explanation. The AA have not helped me to write this, although I have had helpful information submitted to me by other astrologers who were observing the situation too. The AA have agreed that it is a fair and self-evident account of the situation as they understand it too.

¹¹ My own letter of complaint to the BBC contains many references to relevant policy breaches.

¹² www.skyscript.co.uk/astrology_a_trusted_science.html - published online 4th February 2010.