

Top 10 Worst Anti-Science Websites

My list of the worst offenders on the web in the promotion of scientific and factual misinformation.

By Brian Dunning, Skeptoid Podcast
Episode 283, November 08, 2011
<http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4283>

The Internet is a dangerous place. It's full of resources, both good and bad; full of citations linking one to another, sometimes helpfully, sometimes not. Today we're going to point the skeptical eye at ten of the worst web sites in terms of quality of science information that they promote. To make this list, they not only need to have bad information, they also need to be popular enough to warrant our attention.

Many of these sites promote some particular ideology, but I want to be clear that that's not why they're here. Sites that make this list are only here because of the quality of the science information that they advocate.

As a measure of each site's popularity, I'm giving its ranking on Alexa.com as of this writing. Of course this changes over time, so I'm rounding them off to give a general idea of each site's traffic. Also, I'm giving its US traffic ranking, as these are English language sites and the worldwide rankings are skewed by sites in China, Russia, and the rest of the non-English world. For a starting point of reference, Skeptoid.com's ranking is currently about 40,000, meaning that 40,000 web sites in the United States get more traffic than I do. And, compared to the number of web sites there are, that number is actually not half bad — but note how it compares to some of these sites promoting misinformation.

Let's begin at the bottom of our list of the worst offenders, with a site that nevertheless has staggering amounts of traffic:

10. Huffington Post

huffingtonpost.com
Alexa ranked #23
Google PageRank 8

The Huffington Post is arguably one of the heaviest trafficked news, opinion, and information sources on the Internet. Its many editors and 9,000 contributors produce content that runs the gamut and is generally decent, with one exception: medicine. HuffPo aggressively promotes worthless alternative medicine such as homeopathy, detoxification, and the thoroughly debunked vaccine-autism link. In 2009, Salon.com published a lengthy critique of HuffPo's unscientific (and often exactly wrong) health advice, subtitled *Why bogus treatments and crackpot medical theories dominate "The Internet Newspaper"*. HuffPo's tradition is neither new nor just a once-in-a-while thing.

Science journalists have repeatedly taken HuffPo to task for this, and repeatedly been rebuffed or not allowed to submit fact-based rebuttals. HuffPo's anti-science stance on health and medicine appears to be deliberately systematic and is unquestionably pervasive.

9. Conservapedia

conservapedia.com
Alexa ranked #13,600
Google PageRank 5

Conservapedia was founded by Christian activist Andrew Schlafly as resource for homeschooled children, intended to counter what he saw as an anti-Christian bias in Wikipedia and science information in general. It is, in short, an encyclopedia that gives a Young Earth version of every article instead of the correct version. If you want to know about dinosaurs, geology, radiometric dating, the solar system, plate tectonics, or pretty much any other natural science, Conservapedia is your Number One resource to get the wrong answer. That it is intended specifically as a science resource for homeschooled children, who don't have the benefit of an accredited science teacher, is its main reason for making this list.

8. Cryptomundo

cryptomundo.com
Alexa ranked #41,800
Google PageRank 5

Run by cryptozoologists Loren Coleman, Craig Woolheater, John Kirk, and Rick Noll, Cryptomundo promotes virtually every mythical beast as being a real living animal. Cryptozoology may be a fun and illustrious hobby for some, but its method of beginning with your desired conclusion and working backwards to find anecdotes that might support it is pretty much the opposite of the scientific method. Cryptomundo only ranks as #8 on our list because, let's face it, cryptozoology is not exactly the most harmful of pseudosciences. It's more of a weekend lark for enthusiasts of the strange.

Cryptomundo's forum moderators have something of a notorious reputation for editing comments posted by site visitors, and for deleting comments that express skeptical points of view. Some skeptical commenters have reported even being banned completely from the forums, not for spamming or trolling, but just being consistently skeptical.

See this screen capture of Cryptomundo's amusing criticism of my inclusion of their site.

7. 9/11 Truth.org

911truth.org
Alexa ranked #109,000
Google PageRank 5

The only reason this site has such a low traffic rating is that its field is saturated with competition. 9/11 Truth.org is only the largest of the many, many web sites who began with the idea that 9/11 was a false flag operation against American citizens staged by the American government, but unlike most others, it has stayed on topic. Even more than a decade after 9/11, 911 Truth.org still manages to find and post articles almost daily promising to reveal new evidence proving the conspiracy.

6. Mercola.com

mercola.com
Alexa ranked #650
Google PageRank 6

The sales portal of alternate medicine author Joseph Mercola has received at least three warnings from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to stop making illegal health claims about the efficacy of its products. A tireless promoter, Mercola has built his web site into probably the most lucrative seller of quack health products. But Mercola's web site is not wrong because it's lucrative; it's wrong because the vast majority of its merchandise has no proven medical value, yet virtually all of its product descriptions imply that they can improve the customer's health in some way. Today's Featured Products include:

Probiotics supplements that can "boost your body's defense against disease and aid your production of essential nutrients".

and

Krill oil that provides "A healthy heart, Memory and learning support, Blood sugar health, Anti-aging, Healthy brain function and development, Cholesterol health, Healthy liver function, Boost for the immune system, Optimal skin health".

At least Mercola.com usually includes the required statement (tucked way down at the bottom of the screen in a tiny font) that "These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease." Presumably that's a result of all the regulatory action he's suffered.

5. Answers in Genesis

answersingenesis.org
Alexa ranked #9,800
Google PageRank 6

Evangelical Christian web sites are a fine thing for those who roll that way, and most such sites do good charitable and social works. But a few stray from that mission, and Answers in Genesis is the leading example. Their "Statement of Faith" is, in their own words:

Scripture teaches a recent origin for man and the whole creation, spanning approximately 4,000 years from creation to Christ. The days in Genesis do not correspond to geologic ages, but are six [6] consecutive twenty-four [24] hour days of creation. The Noachian Flood was a significant geological event and much (but not all) fossiliferous sediment originated at that time.

There's no way around it: This is not doing any kind of a service mission, this is unabashed promotion of scientific misinformation. Even the world's largest Christian organization, the Catholic Church, rejects Answers in Genesis' alternate-reality version of geology, biology, and virtually every other natural science. Worse, AiG provides a wide array of highly polished, very professionally written educational materials including study guides, online courses, and lesson plans for teachers. So far the American court system has done a pretty good job of keeping this stuff out of public schools, but their penetration into private schools and homeschools is only growing.

4. Australian Vaccination Network

avn.org.au
Alexa ranked #21,600 (in Australia)
Google PageRank 4

The website of Australia's best known anti-vaccine activist, Meryl Dorey, earns its recognition by the sheer magnitude of scientific, regulatory, and ethical criticism it has received. The AVN really put itself on the map with its refusal to post a disclaimer clearly identifying itself as anti-vaccine, as ordered by Australia's Health Care Complaints Commission. It's had its license to accept charitable donations revoked for multiple violations of the Charitable Fundraising Act, and its anti-science stance earned it a spot on *Australian Doctor* magazine's "Top 50 Medical Scandals of the Past 50 Years". If I wanted, I could do an entire podcast just listing the violations, criticisms, complaints, investigations, and regulatory actions the AVN has been hit with.

Yet it persists, boasts thousands of members, and continues to significantly reduce levels of immunity to infectious disease within Australia.

3. Prison Planet / InfoWars

prisonplanet.com
Alexa ranked #2,000
Google PageRank 6
infowars.com
Alexa ranked #566
Google PageRank 6

There doesn't appear to be any clear difference between Prison Planet and InfoWars, the websites of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Both sites are heavily trafficked collections of articles predicting the takeover of the world by nebulous Illuminati in the form of governments, companies and industries. There's nothing wrong with being anti-government and anti-corporate; they're perfectly valid philosophies, if that's the way you roll. Alex Jones' sites are on this list for having almost daily made predictions of New World Order takeovers, global currencies, and mass executions for many years, none of which have ever come true; and for distorting virtually every aspect of modern society into evidence of some vague worldwide plot to control or kill law abiding citizens.

2. Age of Autism

ageofautism.com
Alexa ranked #33,500
Google PageRank 5

This website of investigative reporter Dan Olmsted promotes his own notions that autism is caused by mercury toxicity (contrary to what we've learned scientifically), that it is increasing dramatically at epidemic proportions, not just in counting methods but in actual incidence (contrary to what's been measured), and that it can be cured by holistic treatments, supplementation, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, removal of dental fillings, and bowel cleansing (contrary to all research done on these methods).

Web authors like Olmsted obviously must know that their writing is at variance with science based findings, so there must be some kind of cognitive dissonance going on, outright dishonesty, or perhaps even a belief in a global Big Pharma conspiracy of bad science.

Lest you think that fringe cranks like Olmsted have no influence and their sites can be dismissed, Age of Autism articles were cited in a 2006 U.S. House of Representatives bill to re-investigate the thoroughly debunked link between mercury and autism — using taxpayer funds to challenge science-based medicine.

1. Natural News

naturalnews.com
Alexa ranked #1,000
Google PageRank 6

When Natural News began, it was basically the blog and sales portal of anti-pharmaceutical activist Mike Adams. His basic premise has always been the Big Pharma conspiracy, the idea that the medical industry secretly wants to keep everyone sick, and conspires with the food industry to make people unhealthy, all driven by a massive plot of greed to sell poisonous medicines. Adams appears to have become a protégé of Alex Jones, for he now writes on Natural News at least as many police state conspiracy articles as he does anti-science based medicine articles. They carry ads for each other on their sites as well.

Some examples of current articles on Natural News are:

New World Order: Implantable RFID chips capable of remotely killing non-compliant 'slaves' are here

Vaccines lower immunity

Fluoride means lower IQs and more mental retardation

and of course:

Jumping rope and 9/11 truth - how the sheeple have been trained to avoid unpopular truth about WTC 7

Natural News' misleading title — I see very little on the site that I would think to classify as "natural news" — and pretense of being a health resource has helped it to become an often cited and heavily read site. For its frighteningly large influence, and abysmal quality of information, it earns the #1 spot on this list.



Brian Dunning

© 2011 Skeptoid Media, Inc.

References & Further Reading

Barrett, S. "FDA Orders Dr. Joseph Mercola to Stop Illegal Claims." *Quackwatch*. Stephen Barrett, MD, 26 May 2011. Web. 1 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.quackwatch.org/11Ind/mercola.html>>

Novella, S. "Mike Adams Takes On 'Skeptics'." *Neurologica*. New England Skeptical Society, 25 Jan. 2010. Web. 1 Nov. 2011. <<http://theness.com/neurologicablog/index.php/mike-adams-takes-on-skeptics/>>

Parikh, R. "The Huffington Post is Crazy about Your Health." *Salon.com*. Salon Media Group, 30 Jul. 2009. Web. 1 Nov. 2011. <http://www.salon.com/2009/07/30/huffington_post/singleton/>

Pehm, K. "Letter to AVN." *Health Care Complaints Commission*. New South Wales Government, 7 Jul. 2010. Web. 1 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.stopmeryldorey.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/HCCC-Report.pdf>>

Phelps, D. "The Anti-Museum: An overview and review of the Answers in Genesis Creation Museum." *Defending the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools*. National Center for Science Education, 17 Oct. 2008. Web. 1 Nov. 2011. <<http://ncse.com/creationism/general/anti-museum-overview-review-answers-genesis-creation-museum>>

Zaitchik, A. "Meet Alex Jones: The Most Paranoid Man in America." *Rolling Stone Magazine*. 17 Mar. 2011, Issue 1199.