

The Pink Bridge

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In recent years, the pink breast cancer campaign has raised millions of dollars for breast cancer research and spread “awareness” by establishing a productive, profitable partnership between charities and corporations (S. Orenstein). Victims of breast cancer benefit from this relationship because a portion of the profits from the corporations’ “pink” branded products—ranging from pink rubber ducks to Smith & Wesson handguns with pink handles—are donated by companies to charitable foundations like Susan G. Komen for the Cure (Penny). The corporations themselves benefit not just financially from the sales of these products, but also from the image of the “good corporate citizen” generated by their association with a worthy cause.

However, this close relationship between corporations and charities is not appreciated by everyone who promotes research and public awareness of breast cancer. An increasingly vocal group of detractors sees the “pink” campaign as insincere and ineffective. Critic Laurie Penny describes the campaign as a “sugary-pink, boob-bouncing carnival of concerned consumerism” that is “worse than useless,” while author and medical sociologist Gayle Sulik asks, “What do [pink products] have to do with breast cancer? [The pink movement] is about marketing” (qtd. in Raymond).

Clearly, this pink debate focuses on the inappropriate association between breast cancer and commerce, rather than on the current state of scientific research or social realities. These worries about commerce are certainly worthy criticisms. But when critics omit any mention of breast cancer from their arguments, the impact of marketing campaigns on research and on people is ignored. Why, though, would people who claim to speak for victims of breast cancer and corporate greed neglect so much information?

Many people—companies, researchers, and individuals alike—want to participate in the struggle against breast cancer. We all want to find a cure. We all want to support people with breast cancer and their families as they endure treatment. We all want to raise awareness about breast cancer so that people are diagnosed earlier and are treated in more humane and helpful

ways. The controversy of the pink debate is about the role profit-driven corporations should play in this struggle, given that corporations also view the “pink” campaign as a beneficial marketing strategy and partnership with charities as a smart business move.

In characterizing the relationship between corporations and breast cancer charities, critics often draw attention to the venality of corporate motives, treating non-philanthropic money as a corruption of true charitable motives. According to Susan Orenstein, Susan G. Komen, the largest breast cancer charity—what critics call a “corporate darling”—is not afraid to admit that its involvement with corporations is a “marketing relationship, not a philanthropic relationship.” Penny, in her article “A Sexy Way to Die,” points to “a gamut of increasingly demeaning stunts” by companies that have caused the focus of “awareness” campaigns to drift away from communicating “the facts of cancer” to better appeal to consumers. And when Barbara Brenner, a member of a group called Breast Cancer Action, warns that “companies will turn away from cancer when it suits their purpose,” Orenstein suggests that Brenner is actually presenting a sensible business philosophy. If an ad campaign is not increasing profits, companies will stop running those ads, which seems heartless from a “philanthropic” perspective, but is perfectly logical from a “marketing” perspective (Orenstein).

However, by viewing the role of corporations in this “pure philanthropy versus corrupt corporatization” way, critics fail to consider the vast amount of money these corporations have donated and the very real publicity “pink ribbon marketing” has generated. This unequivocal suspicion of corporate motives seems simplistic and at odds with the pink critics’ apparent desire to improve the state of our understanding and treatment of breast cancer. Why are they so vehement?

Perhaps we might view such reactions as a way to assert control over an illness that in many ways is beyond our control. To displace the critical focus from a seemingly predatory disease to the predatory actions and motivations of corporations changes the way pink critics and their readers understand who is in control and who is vulnerable. For example, Barbara Brenner portrays society as vulnerable and ignorant prey who must be protected: “Nobody who buys [pink products] is stupid, but they’ve been told by corporate America that buying solves the problem [of breast cancer]” (qtd. in Raymond). We also see this displacement in the way the language of disease is deployed. In the rhetoric of its critics, the pink campaign, along with the companies and even charities involved, has morphed into an actual illness—a “sickly pink rash,” as Laurie Penny puts it. This displacement of “sickliness”

onto the corporate sphere also allows for new agency. When “corporate America” is the aggressor, people like Brenner can step up and take action to prevent victimization, even metaphorically begin to fight back. In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Barron H. Lerner warns us that “another Breast Cancer Awareness Month is upon us,” as though the month, not breast cancer, were the disease we must arm ourselves against. A “watchdog group” called Think Before You Pink even exists to monitor pink products in the way neighborhood watch programs monitor crime (Raymond).

The difference between this corporate disease and breast cancer is that the former is one we, ordinary people, can fight. After all, most of us are not scientists, and we cannot find a cure for cancer on our own. Nevertheless, with cancer, as with all illness, we want to imagine ourselves to be “fighting” the bodily disease with our minds. Virginia Woolf examines this way of conceptualizing disease in her essay “Illness: An Unexploited Mine.” Humans, she asserts, view themselves in two parts: there is the brilliant mind and the “plain sheet of glass” that is the body, which functions as a case or container for the mind (582). The problem is, as Woolf explains, that illness cannot be thought away or fought off directly with intelligence, and the mind inevitably recoils from its unbeatable enemy. While the body “wages [great wars] . . . the mind is a slave” to the disease “in the solitude of the bedroom” (583). Woolf sees a solution not in science, but in literature, which she argues can serve as a bridge connecting the sick individual to the outside world. With literature allowing us to retain control over our minds, displacing our concerns about our uncontrollable bodies onto something not “real” but more controllable, we can better face the isolation that illness forces upon us.

By engaging in the pink debate and criticizing corporations, we can divert ourselves intellectually, identifying an enemy that we, as non-scientists, can confront and hold accountable. This may be, like literature for Woolf, a lifeline for critics and cancer patients alike. Peggy Orenstein, herself a survivor, explains that breast cancer is a disease “free of sin, not clearly tied to overeating . . . or smoking,” making its onset impossible to rationalize away. Rather than leaving themselves susceptible to the whims of a capricious disease, then, critics of the pink campaign can see themselves as defenders of the public fighting greedy and manipulative companies. A sense of vulnerability is replaced by a sense that they can change something, a sense that this is one sickness they may be able to cure.

Meanwhile, the real breast cancer battle, the one that takes place in laboratories, remains out of our control. Even when scientists publish details about this fight in scientific and medical journals, the complex, opaque char-

acter of modern oncology means that ordinary people rarely understand the details of the disease, let alone feel able to debate about it. In contrast, Nancy G. Brinker, the founder of Komen for the Cure, notes that pink products “allow people to participate in the [pink] movement conveniently,” so that anyone who wants to help in the search for a breast cancer cure can actually do so without getting lost in the specifics (qtd. in Raymond). In a *Time* article, Stacy Stukin describes how breast cancer survivor Barb Jarmoska derives a sense of accomplishment from her “pink” biking event, which she uses to raise money for breast cancer research and “pay homage to two dear friends she [has] lost to the disease.” Health studies professor Samantha King also admits that “people often say to me, ‘I’m . . . busy, and this is something . . . I can do’” (qtd. in Stukin). The “pink” campaign gives the public an opportunity to take action, and the debate does the same for critics. Both critics and proponents of the “pink” campaign are participating in a fight they can understand.

We cannot fully comprehend this seemingly hollow “pink” debate without facing the tension between our desire for participation in the domain of science and the barrier of knowledge that prevents us from participating. In his essay “Elevating Science, Elevating Democracy,” Dennis Overbye argues that “science and democracy have always been twins,” suggesting that we need not regard the tension between democratic participation and scientific expertise as an insurmountable problem. Both the general public and scientists engage in a “buzzing, testing, probing . . . cloud of activity,” and can therefore achieve similar goals. We may not be directly involved in the scientists’ war against breast cancer, but we are nevertheless fully immersed in a parallel fight, one in which we started to feel a sense of inclusion. And if Overbye values science because it instills in us the “habit of questioning that is invaluable in the rest of society,” we should view the pink controversy as an exercise of that “habit.” “If we are not practicing good science, we probably aren’t practicing good democracy,” writes Overbye.

But science itself is certainly not a democracy. Science today has numerous prerequisites; scientists and researchers must hold multiple degrees to lend credibility to their status as the “know-it-alls” of society—those who genuinely have a chance of conquering or controlling breast cancer. We depend on a group of elite thinkers to solve our problems, almost without any say in how they will go about doing so. Science’s power derives from the notion that it is, as Overbye puts it, “the most successful human activity of all time.” And yet, consider space travel: humankind has been sending humans into outer space for nearly 50 years, but only 519 people have actually left the

earth's atmosphere, as opposed to the billions who have not (Harwood). With so much miraculous power concentrated in the hands of so few people, Overbye worries "that scientists [are] in the awkward position of being expected to save the world."

We can certainly see the effect of this expectation in the pink debate. Gayle Sulik, who criticizes the pink campaign in her book *Pink Ribbon Blues*, reasons in an interview that "for all the money raised, you would have thought we would have a cure by now" (qtd. in Horner). Sulik assumes that all scientists need to produce a cure is money, and she is not alone. Stukin tells us to "strip off [our] pink-tinted sunglasses" and face the thieving corporations, as though the persistence of breast cancer were due to the fact that our money is going to businesses instead of scientists. One of the positive benefits of the pink marketing campaigns, the sense that we are able to participate in the "fight," leaves us feeling shortchanged when no clear gains are produced.

This problem reflects a larger problem: the general public perceives science as the exclusive domain of scientists. Physicist Freeman Dyson presents a possible solution to this so-called elitism in his essay "Our Biotech Future," in which he discusses his proposal for "domesticating" advanced biotechnology so that controversial subjects such as genetic engineering can be accepted by the general public. Dyson believes that the reason such topics are "unpopular and controversial" is that they are "in the hands of large corporations," and therefore out of reach for ordinary citizens, and it is this distance that provokes disputes, disinformation, and discord. Therefore, when science is "domesticated," it will be accepted, and much of the negative discourse will subside. The key to this taming of biotechnology is making it "user-friendly" and "available" to the public—enabling a more practical kind of participation. One idea he offers is to sell genetic engineering kits for animal and plant breeders, or even children, to play with to clear away misconceptions about the practice. Dyson sees this participation as good in itself—an outlet for human creativity and playfulness: "Designing genomes will be a personal thing, a new art form as creative as painting or sculpture."

Dyson's proposition may be plausible for genetic engineering, but how would we apply it to a less "creative" scientific pursuit like the search for a cure for breast cancer? What the public really needs to fully participate in and embrace breast cancer research is more extensive knowledge—of human biology, medicine, chemistry, scientific methodology. Education is not something you can simply package in kits and sell in stores. Another discrepancy exists between the role that controversy plays in biotechnology and breast cancer.

In an important sense, though not in the scientific way Dyson is thinking of, breast cancer has already been domesticated: the result is the pink debate. Those involved in this war are authors, professors, and “pink” consumers, not to mention those like Barb Jarmoska who are motivated by their own experiences with the disease. The topic of breast cancer has infiltrated people’s homes and discussions because “everyone either has had the disease, fears she’ll get it, or knows someone who has” (Stukin).

But is the debate directly related to the actual science behind the breast cancer fight? Perhaps not, but there is more to the relationship between science and democracy than the fact that they are simply “twins” (Overbye). We do not all have to become scientists for science to be democratic. We have created a society in which the pink debate is not a distraction to keep us occupied while we wait for a breast cancer cure, but, as Woolf theorized, a bridge that lets us imagine we are participating in the real war. That we consider the controversy surrounding the pink campaign to be *the* battle against breast cancer means that all of us who are participating in the pink debate can feel as empowered as the researchers who wrestle with oncological minutiae in search of a cure. We are essentially democratizing science, not only because the debate itself has been “domesticated,” but because it inspires in us the feeling that we have a say in how society’s quandaries are handled (Dyson). If we did not have the debate to empower us, we would have no choice but to surrender ourselves to the mercy of a group of elite scientists, giving up the spirit of independence—the “poking, probing, argumentative . . . cloud of activity”—that defines a democracy (Overbye). “Writer and biologist Lewis Thomas once likened [democracy] to an anthill,” notes Overbye; debate is the mechanism that keeps us tunneling, working to spread our egalitarian principles into “every nook and cranny of the world.” The desire to become involved in science is why we create controversy. We need debate for science to be a democratic discipline. Unless we engage in discourse, we have no way of bridging the gap between the cancer in our homes and the cancer in research laboratories.

The “pink” debate, which gives the public an unpleasant image of the companies as “trivializ[ing] breast cancer” and “exploit[ing] survivors for a profit,” is exactly what the public needs and can respond to, while scientists continue to work and benefit from the money raised by charities and the publicity created by ad awareness (Horner). According to microbial taxonomy expert Carl Woese, “It is becoming increasingly clear that to understand living systems in any deep sense, we must . . . see them not . . . as machines, but as a stable, complex, dynamic organization” (qtd. in Dyson). Perhaps this is

how we ought to view our situation. We cannot see the debate as meaningless or science as hopelessly inaccessible; when they meet, what is achieved is the “stable” and “dynamic” system that enables non-scientists and scientists to co-exist as improved solutions emerge.

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80 - MERCER STREET