

Truth Sheet #03-4

How the NCSE Uses False Charges of “Misquotation” to Stifle Scientific Debate

Overview: Like the boy that cried “Wolf!,” the National Center for Science Education (NSCE) and its supporters repeatedly charge that scientists affiliated with Discovery Institute misquote or otherwise misrepresent the research of evolutionary biologists. On closer inspection, however, these charges turn out to be groundless. They are an intimidation tactic employed by the NCSE to stifle legitimate scientific debate over neo-Darwinism. If the NCSE wants to be taken seriously, it should stop inventing false charges of misquotation and start answering the arguments offered by Darwin’s scientific critics.

1. Why do Darwinists make these false claims?

- Basically, it’s an easy way to silence scientific critics of Darwinism without ever having to address the substance of their arguments.
- Some Darwinists seem to think that only other Darwinists have the moral right to cite their research. Almost by definition, any critic of Darwinism who cites research by a Darwinist is regarded as guilty of misquotation because his motives aren’t really “pure.”
- Many Darwinists don’t want to publicize scientific controversies over neo-Darwinism because they fear aiding “creationists.” As evolutionist Daniel Hillis puts it, “There’s a feeling in biology that scientists should keep their dirty laundry hidden.... There’s a strong school of thought that one should never question Darwin in public.”
- While it’s understandable that Darwinists don’t want their research cited by critics of Darwinism, published research ultimately belongs to everyone—including critics of *currently accepted scientific theories*. As long as critics of Darwinism accurately describe the research they cite, it’s completely unfair to accuse them of misrepresentation.

2. What are the tell-tale signs of false charges of misquotation?

- One sure-fire sign is when a Darwinist makes a generalized charge without providing any specifics. It’s all too easy to simply assert that someone has quoted a Darwinist “out of context.” Such vague claims need to be backed up by detailed evidence to be credible.
- Another sign of a false charge is when a Darwinist mischaracterizes what an opponent really said. For example, a Darwinist might loudly protest that a critic of Darwinism has misrepresented him as a supporter of “intelligent design.” The only problem is that the critic of Darwinism didn’t do any such thing. The Darwinist is putting words in the critic’s mouth in order to refute something the critic never really said.
- The best antidote to such false charges is for people to go back and check the original sources on their own to determine who is really engaging in misrepresentation.

3. What are some examples of false charges?

- In 2001 Discovery Institute criticized PBS's "Evolution" series by citing the work of evolutionists whose views were ignored by the series. The NCSE responded by publishing statements from some of these evolutionists denouncing the Institute for allegedly misrepresenting their work. But all of the claims of misrepresentation were bogus.
- For example, evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne was incensed that Discovery Institute had cited his pungent criticisms of evolutionary psychology, and he attacked the Institute for trying to "sow doubt about the fact of evolution simply because scientists do not know every detail about how evolution occurred." Yet in citing Coyne's views, Discovery had made perfectly clear that Coyne was an evolutionist. Ironically, Coyne's statement denouncing the Institute actually confirmed the accuracy of the Institute's description of his views. Coyne reiterated that he had been "a strong critic" of evolutionary psychology "because... its practitioners often hold low standards of evidence and because it is difficult to test theories about behaviors that evolved millions of years ago."
 - Documentation of the NCSE's false charges of misquotation relating to the "Evolution" series can be found in following articles: "National Center for Science Education Falsely Charges Discovery Institute With Misquotation," http://www.reviewevolution.com/press/pressRelease_NCSEFalseCharg.php, and "National Center for Science Education's Shrill Campaign in Defense of 'Evolution,'" http://www.reviewevolution.com/press/pressRelease_NCSECampaign.php.
- In 2003 NCSE supporter Sean Carroll similarly denounced Discovery Institute Senior Fellow John West for allegedly misrepresenting his views. Carroll accused West of citing an article by Carroll "as purported support for his view that alternatives to contemporary evolutionary science ought to be presented in biology textbooks." In fact, West did no such thing. He merely cited Carroll to show that even evolutionists admit there is a legitimate scientific debate over whether microevolutionary processes can be extrapolated to explain macroevolution. Rather than criticize what West really said, Carroll debunked a straw man.
 - For a detailed account of Carroll's false charge of misquotation, see "Evolutionist Overreacts," <http://www.discovery.org/viewDB/index.php3?command=view&id=1535&program=CRSC%20Responses>.

4. What is the bottom line?

- If Darwin-only activists like the NCSE want to be taken seriously, they need to stop relying on cheap debating tricks like false charges of misquotation and start addressing the substantive arguments made by Darwinism's scientific critics.