

## BEYOND OPINION

Among us, only one third of the men and women who are supposed to do science end up taking the results of their research to qualified journals; that is, one out of three researchers adequately informs of his or her achievements. The task of transmitting that knowledge to the general public or disseminating science has fallen traditionally upon the shoulders of journalists. To express opinions and to criticize are the two other elements of the process that begins by informing and disseminating, thus closing the virtuous communicational circle.

To render an opinion about facts of science implies their analysis and placement within a doctrinal body of knowledge, while those facts that result from a transcendental intellectual endeavor due to their universality and lack of temporal framework are the subject of criticism and judged in the light of values innate to humans, such as goodness and beauty. Contrary to the professional specialization required to inform or divulge veraciously, all of us feel free to give an opinion or critic on any subject.

We bring up these considerations after taking into account the reactions that have been produced, in Venezuela, by an article of opinion written by the physicist and mathematician Claudio Mendoza and published in a newspaper distributed nationwide. Therein he criticizes the nuclear energy policy of the government of Venezuela ([www.asovac.org.ve/bitacora/?p.34](http://www.asovac.org.ve/bitacora/?p.34)). Some saw in it an excellent explanation of the complexities and contradictions inherent to the development of nuclear energy and the almost unavoidable temptation to use it as a tool of the maximal power. To many it was an opportune call of alert by a pacifist, worried by the lightness with which a most delicate matter in which the country has very limited expertise is being handled. A worrisome matter in view of the fact that the lightest slip of the most insignificant possessor of some nuclear artifact would suffice to erase the whole mankind from the face of the planet.

Others interpreted the same text as a manipulation of information moved by an unreasonable opposition to the government. They question the irresponsibility implied in stating that Venezuela could be considering membership in the nuclear club, even though this has not been proven, but as information could gain for us the wrath of the giant of the north; a power that does not stop to honor technicalities such as to ascertain the veracity of the intelligence being handled when it feels threatened by weapons of massive destruction.

The consequences of the article by Claudio Mendoza were that the academic institution where he works, a governmental entity, subjected him to public scorn by disqualifying him professionally and, more recently, by dismissing him as head of the laboratory where he performed with brilliance during the last decades. To windup the task, political spokesmen have requested trials for treason to the fatherland, for him as well as for all those who have manifested support for his crusade or refused to turn his writing into a crime.

*Interciencia*, as many times before, makes itself echo of the defense of liberty of speech and pleads for respect to the opinions and beliefs of everyone. It does not suffice that a power maintains that the best proof of liberty of speech in its domains is represented by the publication of texts such as that of Claudio Mendoza. This could simply suggest that there is no previous censure but, considering the consequences that his writing has had, it is very difficult not to conclude that freedom of speech is under coercion in Venezuela.

In this order of ideas, the opportunity ought to be good to alert those facing the very understandable reaction of choosing silence and, in that way, avoid sanctions for expressing opinions or criticisms. In the measure that a government forces its citizens to keep outside controversial matters, they will in turn end up by isolating themselves and by retiring from life in society. The consequences of such an attitude are well gathered in history, where examples abound of the tragedies borne by the violation of freedom of speech.

To give opinions about freedom of teaching, paradigms, successes, failures, disappointments and hope, in other words, about the human and the divine in science, is the best warranty that our societies understand what we do, while for researchers it is the best way to know what societies want, need and expect from us. The challenge lies within the mutual respect that is due amongst us and which implies not abusing of temporal power to overpower or silence the awareness that claims for the common good, even though it may not seem to be so.

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