

The Bizarre World of Healthcare (11)

The Web's Backstroke

In a classic case of “harm set, harm get”, a French homeopathy giant earns public condemnation after threatening a private critic with legal action.

You may have heard about the curious online phenomenon that is named after American actress Barbra Streisand. This phenomenon terms an attempt to hide or remove information, resulting in the unintended consequence of publicising it more widely. In 2003, Streisand had tried to enforce the elimination of an aerial photo on an unknown private website that shows her coastal villa. However, Streisand made a mistake. She sued the photographer for \$50 million – and thereby, unwittingly and repeatedly, fuelled publicity. Suddenly, public interest in the irrelevant web picture increased substantially, attracting more than 420,000 people to the site within four weeks. Not only did the unfortunate Ms. Streisand lose the legal suit, her name was also coined to denote such failed censorship attempts.

Since then, such an accidental flop is referred to as the “Streisand effect”.

Recently, a French homeopathy company generated an equivalent effect. They tried to suppress unwelcome truths and failed ingloriously. They should have known better. But let's tell the whole story.

It all began in Italy, like a case of David and Goliath. On 13th July, Samuele Riva, a 28 year-old computer scientist and blogger from Milan, posted an ironic text about homeopathy on his site, *www.blogzero.it*. Two weeks later, Riva added a second commentary on the same topic (*Omeopatia: mito e leggenda*, in English “Homeopathy: myth and legend”). Riva illustrated his stories with two pictures of the homeopathic drug Oscillocoquinum. This alternative blockbuster medicine is marketed by the French company Boiron to alleviate flu-like symptoms.

Oscillocoquinum are sugar pills (85% sucrose and 15% lactose) that originate from duck liver and heart, diluted to 200C. That means that the homeopathic medicine contains one molecule of duck per 100²⁰⁰ (“200C”) molecules of water (and this dilution of pure water is said to be infused somehow into the sugar pills). However, there are only about 100⁴⁰ atoms in the entire universe. In other words, the resulting homeopathic “medicine” contains absolutely no active ingredient. Sounds ridiculous, but that's the way pseudoscience works.

(For those who want to learn more: visit <http://skeptictblog.org/2011/03/03/oscillocoquinum>).

It was just logical that our blogger from Milan placed the following humorous legends under the pictures:



“The absolute nothingness, that allegedly cures flu [...] diluted 200C, contains no molecule of active ingredient”, as well as “Harms seriously (the buyer's) intelligence”.

As you will agree, nothing exceptional had happened, so far. Riva's analysis of the homeopathic situation is accurate and hitting. However, the manufacturer of the “absolute nothingness” hit back. Boiron, who screens the web periodically for unwanted comments, was seriously enraged and threatened Riva via its Italian division. They would bring libel action against him, if he refused to remove the two photos in question, Boiron's management wrote to the lonesome blogger.

Boiron's net income in 2010 was €67 million. The company has more than 4,000 employees and a pushy legal department. These are pretty strong arguments. Subsequently, Samuele Riva gave in and removed the photos.

After that, one might think, the matter would have been laid to rest. Not so, for Goliath Boiron. A company representative contacted Riva's web hoster (i.e. an internet firm that provides web space) and demanded that they delete any further hints on Riva's blog that could be linked with Boiron. In addition, Boiron demanded that Riva's postings on homeopathy be blocked because these were “untrue and derogatory” as well as “likely to do serious damage to homeopathy”. Otherwise, the company would sue again (the letter, written by Boiron Italy's scientific director, Silvia Nencioni, can be viewed in Italian language on www.esowatch.com).

The web hosting company refused both to block Riva's blog and to provide any information on its client. Riva himself again conceded and removed the references that linked to Boiron. Apart from that, he left the blog postings online.

A tie, therefore, between David and Goliath?

Hardly. Almost nobody would have noticed an unknown Italian blogger's qualified criticism (in the Italian language!) of homeopathic pseudoscience – if the powerful Boiron group hadn't been so foolish as to take such harsh action.

Subsequently, the whole blogosphere boiled up within days, publicly denouncing Boiron's attitude as unfair and excessive on more than 100 blogs and websites. Even the *British Medical Journal* and the *Handelsblatt* reported on the affair and multiplied the number of interested readers even further.

That's a really perfect Streisand effect for Boiron. If they only had kept quiet!

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