

RISK: Health, Safety & Environment (1990-2002)

Volume 5
Number 3 *Symposium on Technical Risk in the
Mass Media*

Article 13

June 1994

Review of: Elizabeth M. Whelan, *Toxic Terror: The Truth Behind the Cancer Scares*

Sarah Redfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/risk>



Part of the [Disorders of Environmental Origin Commons](#), and the [Life Sciences Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Sarah Redfield, *Review of: Elizabeth M. Whelan, Toxic Terror: The Truth Behind the Cancer Scares*, 5 RISK 281 (1994).

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Hampshire – Franklin Pierce School of Law at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in RISK: Health, Safety & Environment (1990-2002) by an authorized editor of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact ellen.phillips@law.unh.edu.

Book Review

Elizabeth M. Whelan, *Toxic Terror: The Truth Behind the Cancer Scares* (Prometheus Books 1993). Acknowledgements, appendix, figures, foreword by Norman F. Borlaug, index, notes tables. LC 92-34154; ISBN 0-87975-788-4. [476 pp. Cloth \$26.95. 59 John Glenn Drive, Buffalo NY 14228-2197.]

Toxic Terror revises a book written ten years ago. Its thesis is straightforward: The bad news about health and the environment is not scientifically correct. For example, in the introduction, concern with the growth regulator alar, used to hold apples on trees until they redden, is described as “alarmania”; concern with ethylene dibromide is labeled as “hysterical”; and environmental stories are dismissed as the fantasy of “left-wing environmental groups.” Dr. Whelan lays blame for this on media described as coopted by faulty environmental analysis.

The book, then, might be good news if it provided scientific basis to refute environmental concerns. But its approach is much like what it criticizes. For example, Whelan criticizes scientists who speak negatively about technologies such as pesticides or nuclear power. She is sensitive enough to ask where scientists are who might refute the research papers by environmentalists. After all, if scientists cited by environmentalists are all wrong or even just exaggerating, one might expect more legitimate scientists, as Whelan sees them, to enter the debate and set the public record straight. The answer offered is that legitimate scientists “shun the spotlight” because they don’t want to communicate with the public at large, they don’t want to give the media information about public health, they are afraid of debate and they are afraid that their integrity will be questioned if they or their universities receive research dollars from those they defend. This analysis is likely correct; but it is inadequate to refute research that environmentalists cite. If other scientists are afraid to defend their work and integrity in public arenas, why reject those who aren’t? Whelan’s book does not provide much by way of answer.

Nor does *Toxic Terror* provide the data one needs to accept its central thesis of good news. Again, for example, when Whelan examines criticisms of pesticides for their environmental persistence, she finds persistence to be a virtue, because “fewer applications are needed.” The more persistent organochlorine insecticides are praised as “generally less toxic than many other[s].” Yet, she does not distinguish between short-term or acute toxicity and chronic toxicity, crucial distinctions for meaningful analysis. Also, her conclusion is totally unsupported by any footnote or documentation. Instead, she quotes an unattributed source that the low cost and stability derived from the persistence of the organochlorines are the reason for their usefulness.¹

This lack of support also appears in an appendix entitled, “Myth of the Cancer Epidemic.” As is true elsewhere, the appendix accuses the media of misrepresenting the incidence of cancer and provides a series of graphs showing a decrease in cancer mortality. Yet, the section on breast cancer is telling. Here Whelan shows increased cancer incidence. Rather than consider that this might be cause for legitimate concern, she strongly implies that, because “One report has suggested that there may be two distinct forms of breast tumors... malignant and benign,”² the statistics are but the results of increased self-examination and identification of benign tumors. The report is not cited, and her conclusion is itself as unsupported as many she faults.

Most would like to believe *Toxic Terror*, but it lacks the necessary supporting data and rigorous analysis.³

Sarah Redfield†



¹ All quotations appear at 152-3.

² At 450.

³ See, *The ASCH: Forefront of Science or Just a Front?* Consumer Reports, May 1994, at 319 (Dr. Whelan is president of ASCH, the American Council on Science and Health). See also, *Public-Interest Pretenders*, *op. cit.*, at 316. [Editor]

† Professor Redfield teaches environmental law at Franklin Pierce Law Center. She received her B.A. from Mount Holyoke College, her J.D. from Northeastern University and her LL.M. from Harvard Law School.