

NOTEWORTHY, VIDEO

THE NEW POSTER GIRL OF THE TECHNOCRATS

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The debate over research privatization is intensifying. Here is my annotated transcript of [Sabine Hossenfelder's latest video](#).

I recently angered some people by saying that if I had any choice in the matter, I wouldn't want my taxes to pay for research on the description of smell in the English literature. Some have taken that to mean that I want to defund all of academia. So let's talk about it. Should we defund academia?

I appreciate all experts in English literature; it's part of our cultural heritage, like many other things worth preserving. Acknowledging my own limitations, I avoid commenting on topics like English literature or dark matter, as they are beyond my expertise. So why doesn't SH recognize hers?

She seems not different from the far-right or the far-woke—both of whom hold strong opinions despite lacking scientific arguments.

Yes! No! Hope that clears it up. Thanks for watching. Of course I didn't say that we should defund all of academia. But that'd be insane. And I'm not insane. Though this is of course exactly what an insane person would say, isn't it? What I said is, I think it's going to happen. Academia will be defunded.

I need to pause the tape again. She's not arguing for defunding *all* of academia—only the parts she considers insane or useless. But how can SH predict the future? Is she a new prophet or just a fortune teller?

And that isn't entirely a bad thing. But it isn't entirely a good thing either.

Extinction of the universities isn't entirely bad? [Does this also Include her job](#) here in Munich?

It's going to happen because the current organization of academic research works badly. It's an inefficient use of money and that's for a simple reason. It's a planned economy. Yes, academia is a planned economy. We're financing it the same way that the communists finance their production chains with centralized decision making, committees and five year plans. It worked badly for the communists and it works badly for research. We have oversupplies of string theorists, undersupplies of computer scientists, group think and corruption all over the place. It's a disaster. I don't understand why anyone ever thought this is a good idea.

I agree with most of the description—there's no need to defend academia (although the “planned economy” of China is soon on par with the “free market” U.S.). But what's the alternative to democratic decision-making on funding projects? Expertocracy?

It's also a false dichotomy to claim that all academia is centrally planned. In reality, it's an evolving system where, at least in Western countries, only the broad guidelines are set centrally. This approach makes sense, preventing major gaps and excessive overlap while still allowing ample freedom to pursue individual interests.

And once you realize that the key problem with academia is the central planning, it's obvious what's going to happen and that's what I want to talk about today.

This is an “appeal to probability” — [slowly but surely, we 're ticking off the full list](#) of formal and informal fallacies.

For the purposes of this video, I'll use the word academia to mean tax paid research, not education because that's a different story. People have complained about useless research in academia for half a century and nothing has happened. So why should this time be different?

“people have done...” – a scientist should, of course, provide more details. Once we reject the central tenets, there's no reason to follow the rest of this sermon, right?

It's because of what Elon Musk and his fans have called the woke mind virus, among other things the diversity, equity and inclusion trend that manage to take hold, especially at American universities. This might seem like an entirely different problem, but it's the symptom of the same disease. The reason that people in the tech sector and venture capitalists go on about DEI is that it's anti-meritocracy.

Anti-meritocracy is indeed a major issue, with many gaming the system through publication scores.

Every EU grant application now requires an extensive DEI checklist that is more important than a sound project idea. I've seen this lead to ineffective working groups in more than one EU project that only wasted my time producing zero output. But once acknowledged, this problem can be reformed without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

But because of that, it's inefficient, it stands in the way of progress. Or maybe I should say it was because things have changed dramatically in the past weeks. DEI was all about some people's idea of social justice that candidates should be selected for positions because of who they are, not because of how good they are at their job. The UI puts social justice first and scientific progress second, it's a clash of values. And scientific progress has won.

I think some sectors also need "low-quality" research—either because uncertainty will persist despite significant funding (e.g., air pollution research) or because of its intrinsic social value (e.g., social research on minorities).

This is how the two things belong together. The balance is swinging towards the desire for scientific progress and against inefficient government spending. Just listen to what they're saying. The Silicon Valley billionaire Mark Andreessen has declared that the Avery Tower is an enemy of progress. Elon Musk has called academia a "bastion of communism" that operates with no feedback loop to reality. And he said entirely correctly that most scientific papers are useless. I think success on an academic level would have been quite likely because you can publish some useless paper and most papers are pretty useless. And Peter Thiel thinks that scientists are basically on governmental welfare and therefore need to be silent about dissenting views.

WTF, is SH really citing the right and ultra-right to support her criticism of academia?

The scientists can't talk freely about the science and if you have dissenting views you better keep them to yourself or your government funding will get cut off and they're all on the sort of government welfare or something like that. Or take this quote from a recent opinion piece by William Derechiewicz in the *Chronicles of Higher Education* where he writes about the humanities. Those fields have another thing in common. They're intellectually corrupt. We know what I'm talking about. Any fool idea passes master, no matter how preposterous, as long as it confirms to prevailing theoretical trends and preferred ideological positions. Nobody wants to make waves to speak up at a conference to undermine a colleague or colleague student to invite examination of their own research.

William Deresiewicz has been making money off this never-ending lament for over a decade. And yes, plenty of people speak up—I mean, you're reading the blog of someone who's been doing just that for their entire career.

Data is massage, texts are squeezed or bound and gacked. Joggen helps to paper over cracks in logic. Countervailing evidence is tucked under the cushions. In the foundations of physics the problem presents itself differently. It's not that they ignore evidence, it's that they figure it's easier to publish theories for which there is no evidence. In the life sciences we see research bubbles built on shaky evidence that no one wants to question. In the social sciences, psychology and public health we have p-hackers and post-selectors. In some parts of biomedicine and material science we have an entire industry cranking out scam papers that no one reads and so on. It looks different in each field, but these are all symptoms of the same underlying problem. Researchers in academia don't get paid for being useful. They get paid so long as other people in academia approve. It's a self-optimizing system, yes, but what it optimizes is how to please other academics with the least amount of effort.

Again, identifying a common problem across different fields is a typical right-wing scapegoat strategy.

When I say pleasing other academics, that doesn't necessarily mean they try to agree with each other. Disagreement is necessary to raise the appearance of relevance, a strategy that you can also observe on YouTube. There are some good reasons for tax-paid research. For example, any research to do with national security or research that's necessary to inform parliament, preserve national heritage, all that allows federal agencies to check claims made by companies. For this reason I strongly doubt that academia will ever entirely disappear. But for most of research that's currently financed by taxes, there's no good reason to do it that way.

It looks like a small admission, likely aimed at softening the sting of the expected criticism.

This is why someone somewhere, but most likely Americans, will try to privatize it. It isn't hard to predict which arguments people will raise against that, so let's just go through them. The most common argument I've heard people make for academia is that we need governmental long-term investments because business is only interested in short-term gains. The problem with this argument is that it's not grounded in reality. Most governmental research initiatives are 3, 5 or 10 years at best. The people who think about the long-term progress of human civilization are either private investors like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Yuri Milner, Mike Lutz, or people who operate outside of academia like Edimus Hassibus, who, according to his own account, has basically been plotting his way to artificial superintelligence since elementary school. These people have thought more about long-term investments into societal progress than anyone on any grand review panel ever has.

The common theme of the technocrats I can recognize is the long-term goal of making more money, while significantly changing their approach along the way to becoming rich. The following quotes are just a few examples. They were collected from chatGPT and need to be verified if being hallucinated.

Peter Thiel: "We wanted to create a company that would change the world." to "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."

Mark Zuckerberg: "The thing that we are trying to do at Facebook is just help people connect and communicate more efficiently." to "We will allow more speech by lifting restrictions on some topics ... We will take a more personalized approach to political content, so that people who want to see more of it in their feeds can."

Mark Andreessen: “Social media is democratizing access to information, breaking down traditional gatekeepers, and allowing free speech like never before.” to “The ‘censorship-industrial complex’ is one of the greatest threats to innovation and democracy today.”

Elon Musk: “I think we have a chance to be the world’s most important company.” to “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy.”

Sam Altman: “Generative AI is a tool that can be used for good or bad, and we need to be mindful of its potential impact on society.” to “You only get points when you make something the market wants.”

At the moment, business leaves certain types of research to academia because that way they don’t have to pay for it. That makes a lot of sense, especially if the subject of research is something that can’t be patented easily, like say equations. Algorithms for quantum computers might be an example. Yes, they mostly came out of academia, but not because that was necessary.

Sorry no. It is fact that most came out of academia.

Will the results of privately funded research ever public??

It was because that’s a way for business to profit from tax money. But it’s highly questionable that leaving basic research to academia is a good way to do it. Imagine that we hadn’t left nuclear fusion research to academia in the 1960s. The world will be a completely different place today.

Don’t get the point here.

So, the long-term argument is easy to counter. There’s no reason to think that tax-paid research is any better at long-term impact than privately funded research. Instead, there are good reasons to question that this is so. The second most common argument that I hear is that you never know whether research that might look useless at first might become useful at some point. And that’s too. But just because no one has proved that something is useless doesn’t mean it’s a good idea to do it.

Again, don’t get her point here.

What if I think the government should paint a highway pink because you never know, maybe it's good for something? After all, no one has proved that it's useless.

Sorry, but the usual sarcastic tone aside, this is slowly starting to feel a bit insane.

Does that sound like a silly argument? Yes, it's because it is. It's exactly as silly as saying we should finance research even though we have no idea what it could be useful for. Yes, their antipodus discoveries happen, but there is no evidence that they're more likely to happen in academic rather than in non-academic settings. Indeed, I'd say that coincidentally useless discoveries happen in academia merely proves that it's hard to stop human creativity completely. So there is some deep-sea marine research that had no particular use but later turned out to be a useful inspiration for the development of some drug. That's nice. But maybe if we hadn't left deep-sea exploration to academia, it'd have happened sooner. Maybe if we'd spent the money on something else, it'd have had a bigger impact. You don't have to believe that this would have happened. My point is merely that the claim "useless research sometimes turns out to be useful" is true. But it's not evidence that academic research is an efficient way to go about it. So this argument won't go anywhere either. The third argument I've heard for academia is that there's a lot of research that private investors would never finance because there's no way to make money from it.

This is the main point.

Some knowledge is valuable just for the sake of knowledge, not because it translates to applications, the argument goes. A typical example is knowing that the universe expands, priceless. But which private investor would have financed the research? Well, I would have. And quite possibly you would have too. Because that you watch this channel makes me think that you value knowledge. And the value of a good or service is what we, as the consumers, are willing to pay.

The argument has completely lost all perspective. Could paying for a coffee via PayPal, an OnlyFans account, Substack, YouTube royalties, or monetizing your blog really be part of the discussion?

If I think knowledge is valuable, if I am willing to pay for it, which I am, then it has value. This makes me think that the non-profit argument is based on a misunderstanding over the use of the word “value” or “benefit”. Research itself has monetary value and benefit society because people want it. Privatizing academic research doesn’t mean that all we care about are products. So then you might say “okay, but there’s a lot of research in academia for which that wouldn’t work. There just aren’t enough people who value, say, studies into whether the description of smell in English literature is racist to finance a research group on it.” Well, tough luck. That does nothing to convince me that it’s worth financing. Yes, I’m a terrible person and I’m too old to even be apologetic about it. But before you burn Sabina the witch for her lack of enthusiasm about English literature, remember that I said I’m talking about tax-paid research. A lot of people in the humanities are actually getting paid for education and the value of education is another thing entirely.

Teaching and research have been connected since 1088, with the founding of the University of Bologna.

This brings me to argument number 4, the idea that it’s impractical that each of us makes decisions about every possible research project, both because we don’t have the time and because good judgment takes experts. Those points are both right, but they’re irrelevant.

Invent an irrelevant argument, defeat it, and then declare yourself the winner. Long live the straw man.

You personally don't need to have an opinion on every possible research topic, just like you don't need to have an opinion on every startup to invest into a tech fund or find a financial manager who invests in funds for you. If markets are good at one thing, it's integrating information. If anything, private investors, and that includes you and I, are much better at taking risks than the national funding bodies you find in academia which have become very risk adverse. This brings up the question of whether without tax-paid programs would there have been a Hubble telescope? Would there have been a moon landing? Would there have been a sun? Maybe there wouldn't have been. But that too is rather irrelevant. The question you need to ask is whether the alternative could have been better. Maybe it would have been better to push for artificial intelligence first instead of putting people on the moon. Maybe it would have been better to put more money into humanoid robots first than into particle colliders. Maybe it would have been better to commercialize space travel sooner rather than later. All the money that we pay as taxpayers is money that we don't have available for something else. Economists call that opportunity costs. Every yes to one thing is a no to something else. The "there wouldn't have been" argument is problematic for the same reason as the "you never know" argument. It uses examples of what went well with government funding but doesn't ask what we lost in that process. I think that all of what I just said is fairly obvious, which brings up the question of why did anyone ever think these arguments were plausible in the first place. It's up most scientists subscribe consciously or unconsciously to what I want to call the "great man theory" of science.

I am getting tired. Not sure if I really want to listen up to the end.

Scientists were totally inclusive on this channel when I say "men" that might of course be a woman. I've named it after the "great man theory" of history. It has a thought that history is driven by the actions of a few individuals in key moments. This idea has fallen out of favor with historians and you don't need a great man to explain why. History is strongly driven by geopolitical reality, resource shortages, cultural differences, diseases, religious beliefs, racism and so on. History is made by groups and systemic pressures, not by individuals. There are key moments in history where a single event or action calls dominos to fall, like Hitler's power grab. But the real problem wasn't Hitler, the person. The real problem was systemic.

so, SH wants now also to de-demonize NS Germany in a provocative YT video? Why is this

even an argument against academia?

For one thing, the political system in Germany at the time had severe shortcomings that allowed Hitler to make himself the Führer. But more importantly, German society was vulnerable to pseudoscientific mass propaganda that excused genocide as a necessity with the argument that it'd ultimately benefit the nation. A lot of people believed it. But if it hadn't been Hitler to exploit this weakness, it would have been someone else, somewhere else. And if we don't learn from it, it can happen again. So we have tried to learn the lessons of history by looking beyond individuals. We're looking for systemic developments. And we should do the same in science. Like history, science is driven by systemic developments, much more than individual actions. Scientific knowledge builds gradually. At each moment in history, there are undiscovered connections in the existing knowledge that dedicated and intelligent individuals can discover and then build on. The more intelligent and creative they are, the better they can do that. But they can't work with knowledge that hasn't yet been discovered. That science builds up like this is the reason why scientists often draw similar conclusions at the same time, even if they don't know from each other. It's why calculus was invented at almost the same time by Leibniz and Newton. It's why the light bulb was invented at almost the same time by Edison and Swan. It's why the Higgs boson was proposed six times independently at almost the same time. It's not because these people stole from each other. It's because they had access to the same body of knowledge and drew the same conclusions. Scientific research is a collective enterprise. It's an emergent phenomenon in groups of individuals that build on each other's knowledge. There's no better example against the great month theory of science than Albert Einstein. Einstein was a genius. He was a genius in connecting knowledge that had already been discovered. Minkowski space, Riemannian geometry, the Ritz tensor, Lorentz symmetry, the Poincaré group. Einstein was the one to understand how they fit into physics. Or to use Newton's words, we stand on the shoulders of giants. That science builds up in this gradual way by connecting knowledge means that it matters a lot a) in which temporal order we do research and b) that scientists are well informed about the already existing knowledge. If we just pour a lot of money into some areas and allow researchers to over-specialise what happens is that we build up a lot of knowledge quickly in those areas. But the supporting knowledge base becomes thinner and thinner and it becomes more and more difficult to make new connections. This is, I think, what's happened to the foundations of physics. We've pushed forward and forward with particle collisions at higher and higher

energies. But now the knowledge bases for high-energy particle physics are so far ahead of all other areas of science that there's no knowledge left for them to connect. The only thing they can do now is just guess new pieces of knowledge, but these fall to the ground because they lack support. Even if the speculations were right, we wouldn't know because we have no way of testing them. It's a sign that we have dramatically over-invested into this one area. The relevant point is now this. A market-based investment scheme would never have caused this overfunding of particle physics. Because the harder it becomes to find new knowledge, the more expensive it becomes. A market-based approach would have evened out knowledge discovery across all disciplines. So what's going to happen? There will be some transition period in which universities will try to sell off or rent out research labs to private investors. Academics will collect to form non-profits or for-profit organizations and try to raise money. Most of them will fail. Useless research will die off quickly. The biggest risk is that some of the useful research will die off too. You don't have to believe anything of what I just said. You can dismiss it all and say that Sabina is an anti-intellectual, science-hating, neoliberal nutcase who doesn't understand how free markets work. Or maybe you agree that academia is inefficient but you don't care. You think that everyone's taxes should finance people who are free to research whatever they want. And if that is smelling the English literature, then so be it. And that's fine with me, really. Call me whatever you want. Be free with me how much your heart desires. I'm not telling you this because I want to convince you that we should do this. I merely think that this is the argument you'll see unfolding in the coming decades. Privatized basic research.

We're going in circles now. Maybe SH would have been better off writing this out, rather than just expressing what's on her mind.

If that's what I think will happen, why don't I tell you what we should do? Because I don't know. Why are you asking me? I'm just some YouTuber. I can totally imagine that defunding academia will be a complete disaster and actually make things even worse. I don't know if this will be a net good or bad. But I do know that the next 10 years are going to be interesting. That or I'll be very embarrassed I ever made this video. Things have been developing so quickly in the years and the past weeks that I've really struggled to keep up. But what's helped me a lot was ground news who sponsored this video. Ground news is a news platform that collects and summarizes news which has been published all over the world. Not only do they collect all articles on the same story in one place and give you a quick summary, they also give you a lot of extra information that you don't find in the standard media.

Is this a paid advertisement here??

Take for example the recent news that a judge temporarily blocked Trump's order to cut the overhead on scientific funding. Ground news will collect all articles about this in one place and you can see immediately that this received very little coverage on the political right. You also get a brief summary of talking points and in this case you can see that everyone focuses on the potential harm that might come from interrupting ongoing research. You also get a factuality rating for each news item and it tells you whom the media outlets are owned by and where the news has appeared. Ground news also has this great feature called Blindspot. This tells you which news has been almost exclusively covered only by one side of the political spectrum. And of course I have a special offer for you that's a 40% discount on the Vantage plan which gives you access to all their features. All you need to do is use my link ground.new/sarbina or use the QR code so they'll know I sent you. So go and check this out, I'm sure you won't regret it. Thanks for watching, see you tomorrow.

This clickbait video has 268,810 views (or CPM units), translating to 400€. Are the 400€ really worth the effort to damage academia? I really appreciated SH's earlier videos but this one is leading to a backlash.

What chatGPT says

Feeding the above video to chatGPT, the service also finds many logical fallacies:

1. Straw Man - The author misrepresents opposing arguments (e.g., suggesting that critics believe all research should be funded no matter how useless, or that they think central planning is perfect).
2. False Dilemma - Suggesting that research is either “tax-paid academia” or “private funding,” ignoring hybrid models.
3. Slippery Slope - Implying that because some research is inefficient, academia as a whole will inevitably collapse.
4. Hasty Generalization - Assuming that because some academic research is useless or corrupt, all of academia is dysfunctional.
5. Appeal to Emotion - Phrases like “it’s a disaster” and references to “communist planning” evoke emotional reactions rather than presenting neutral evidence.
6. Guilt by Association - Linking academia to communism to make it seem inherently flawed.
7. Appeal to Authority - Citing Musk, Thiel, and Andreessen as if their opinions alone validate the argument.
8. Cherry-Picking - Focusing on failures and inefficiencies in academia while ignoring its successes.
9. False Equivalence - Comparing academia’s funding structure to Soviet central planning, as if they operate in the same way.
10. No True Scotsman - Arguing that “true” scientific progress wouldn’t include DEI initiatives, dismissing counterexamples.
11. Tu Quoque (Whataboutism) - Deflecting criticism by pointing to inefficiencies elsewhere instead of addressing academia’s merits.
12. Ad Hominem - Implying that supporters of academia are biased or corrupt.
13. Red Herring - The lengthy discussion about the “Great Man Theory” of history distracts from the main topic of defunding academia.

14. False Cause (Post Hoc) - Suggesting that market-driven funding would have necessarily prevented over-specialization in physics.
15. Unfalsifiability - Claiming that private investment might have achieved certain breakthroughs faster, but without evidence.

What others say

Sabine doing Sabine things: You take the experiences you made in particle physics and project them onto academia as a whole (@markokriegel5787)

Privatisation of academia sounds awfully dystopian. Why would we want the direction of research to be dictated by investors that only care about maximising profit and minimising costs? It's hard to imagine that academia wouldn't get taken over by number-go-up rather than societal benefit (@aminboumerdassi2334)

The science that we love is under threat. World-wide, there're forces seeking to make it corporate-like, focused on deliverables, or even the enemy of society. Take a stand & celebrate science & music! (@odedrechavi)

and another [Hossenfelder link](#)