

Dear SBCC community,

Upon the advice of my attorney I have decided not to pursue any further legal action against the college, *The Channels* school newspaper, or professor Raeanne Napoleon. Although we have an excellent case that I was defamed, it is not worth the time and cost pursuing legal recourse for what is (hopefully) an inconsequential incident. But I want to be as clear about why I was so upset and responded as I did to Napoleon's All Campus email on the day of my talk at your school, Monday March 19, which was followed by a story in *The Channels* that included quotes from Napoleon and links to blogs alleging that I am a sex offender and rapist. The newspaper did not fact check the claims nor did they even offer me a chance to respond. That was bad enough, but Napoleon did not simply repeat lies told about me in these blogs, she added a new one:

Although the police did not bring formal charges against him, there have been many witnesses that have publicly corroborated the stories of the victims.

What police? Where? When? Never in my life have I been investigated by the police—or any law enforcement agency—for anything anytime anywhere. She simply made that up. I asked her and the newspaper privately to please retract it because it isn't true. I didn't even get the courtesy of a reply. That's why I sent out my statement to the All Campus email. I received no response to that either, and that's when I took the only course left open to me: the law. I have now asked professor Napoleon three times for evidence that police were involved in the allegations against me, and three times she has failed to provide any. The reason is that there is no such evidence because there was no police involvement. But don't take my word for it, check the blogs yourself and you will see that there is no evidence for police involvement. This can be done in a matter of minutes by simply searching "police" in those blogs.

Imagine if I sent out an all campus email alleging that Raeanne Napoleon has misappropriated funds at SBCC, adding "although the police did not bring formal charges against her, there have been many witnesses that have publicly corroborated the stories of her fiscal improprieties." Would you not assume that there was a police investigation? Of course you would! (For the record: I just made that up. There are no such allegations against Napoleon. To *The Channels* newspaper: do not print that quote. It is entirely fabricated, like the original quote.)

*Fact Checking.* That's all it takes to debunk Alternative Facts and Fake News like this, which is why the way *The Channels* newspaper handled this issue is so inexcusable. There is a reason why no newspaper or print publication or journalistic source of any repute has ever published anything about the allegations against me: *they fact check*. The author of the *BuzzFeed* article that launched this whole affair four years ago is a regular contributor to *The New York Times* and

*Los Angeles Times*. There's a reason he ended up publishing it on a click-bait site that features such articles as "Butt Facts That Will Surprise You" and "Can We Guess Your Favorite Sex Position?" It is not because *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* shy away from stories about sexual assault allegations; quite the contrary, they have led the #metoo movement against the despicable men who have treated women criminally. It is because they fact check. There's a reason why I am still a professor at Chapman University, a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, a regular public speaker at colleges and universities around the country, and my books are published by one of the most respectable book publishers in the world: they fact checked the allegations against me and dismissed them. Social justice activists whose priorities veer far from the truth-value of claims and allegations have actively tried to get me fired and failed. Why? Fact checking.

Without fact checking, alternative facts and fake news can spread through citation circles, where A makes a claim, B sites A, C sites B, D sites C, A sites D, and round and round they go. The reason I put my foot down about the fabricated "police" story is that I'm concerned future bloggers will pick up on that and spread it around, adding yet another lie to the story. Over the years I have witnessed on social media (the lowest of standards) the transformation of "allegations of rape" to "known rapist" to "convicted rapist." Convicted! I am confident that most members of the SBCC community are committed to the truth and that in the future fact checking will be incorporated into articles before they are published *The Channels*, thereby averting harm to members of or guests to your campus. To SBCC students training to be journalists, please incorporate fact checking into your practice. We all need it because we all make mistakes.

*A final note about free speech:* I noted in campus email discussions about this incident the subject of free speech came up. I am about as hard core an advocate for free speech as one can be. I have published much on the topic and am a member of several free-speech advocacy groups. And I am not opposed to published criticisms of me and my ideas; far from it. My column in *Scientific American*, for example, is read by about one million people every month. We receive hundreds of letters to the editor, the vast majority of which are critical of me. Every month I select the most critical one I can find and respond to it so that all of us can learn from open dialogue. But criticizing my ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions is different from defaming my character. That is not free speech; that is libel, and it is illegal, as it should be.

Michael Shermer