

Why pick on Chris Packham?

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As I [have already noted today](#), The Times has chosen to question whether Chris Packham is really autistic, despite the fact that he has a diagnosis saying that he is. I have already discussed some aspects of this issue. I also think it is worth asking why they have done this.

I stress that question because I cannot know the motivation of those involved. I have no access to the editorial discussions at The Times, and I am not suggesting that I do. But newspapers make choices. They decide whom to feature, what questions to ask, which doubts to amplify and what associations they want their readers to make. So asking why Chris Packham has become a target is entirely reasonable.

There are, I think, several possible explanations, and they obviously overlap, creating a credible explanation as a consequence.

The first is that Chris Packham is becoming an important figure in British public life. He is no longer simply a television presenter who talks about wildlife. Increasingly, he appears to be assuming the mantle that Sir David Attenborough wore for decades.

That matters. Attenborough acquired authority because millions of people trusted him. He could talk about the destruction of the natural world in a way that politicians could not because people did not think of him as a politician. They thought of him as someone who knew what he was talking about.

Packham has some of that authority, but there is an important difference. He is more explicitly political. He does not simply say that a species is disappearing or that an ecosystem is under threat. He asks why that is happening, who is responsible and what we should do about it. That makes him potentially threatening to some powerful interests.

Packham is a prominent advocate of action on climate change. He challenges the fossil fuel economy. He questions environmentally destructive forms of agriculture. He supports environmental protest. More broadly, he challenges the idea that the pursuit

of profit should take priority over the survival of the ecosystems on which human beings depend.

Whether that makes him anti-capitalist is open to debate, and I am not sure that the label matters very much. What does matter is that much of what he argues for conflicts with the interests of some businesses and wealthy people. That provides one possible reason for wanting to diminish him.

There is another. Chris Packham is clever. He is knowledgeable. He is articulate. He understands science and is an experienced communicator. It is therefore quite difficult to dismiss him as an ignorant environmental protester who does not understand the issues about which he is talking.

So how do you undermine someone like that? That is the challenge his opponents face, and the possibility is that they have chosen to attack his "otherness". That is a standard technique in the far-right playbook.

The Times might think this all too easy in the case of Chris Packham. He is autistic. He has spoken openly about that fact and has a formal diagnosis. Yet The Times has now provided a platform for questioning whether he should really be considered autistic at all.

I have already written about why I think that argument is profoundly mistaken. It ignores masking, relies on stereotypes of what an autistic person is supposed to look like, and risks turning an autistic person's success in navigating a neurotypical world into supposed evidence that they were never autistic at all.

But that ignores the fact that there may be another purpose served by raising the question. If you can persuade people that Chris Packham is wrong about something as fundamental as himself, you can begin to undermine his credibility more generally.

To achieve that, no one has to say explicitly that if Chris Packham is wrong about being autistic, he must also be wrong about climate change. That would plainly be absurd. The connection can be made much more subtly. Just create doubt about his diagnosis, and you create doubt about his self-understanding. Create doubt about his self-understanding, and you potentially create doubt about his judgement. Once that has been achieved, it becomes easier to discount what he says on other issues.

The tactic embraces an old political technique. If you cannot answer an argument, undermine the person making it instead.

That this possibility might explain what The Times is doing matters particularly as this relates to the case of climate change. The evidence for climate change is now overwhelming, and its consequences are increasingly obvious. For those who dislike what effective climate action would require, attacking the evidence is becoming harder.

Attacking those who communicate that evidence may be easier. My question is, does that explain what The Times is really doing?

There is also a broader culture war at work. Autism and ADHD have become subjects of cultural controversy. So has climate change. So has environmental protest. So has almost every serious challenge to the assumption that markets, corporate power and the pursuit of profit should determine the limits of political possibility. It is hard to deny that Chris Packham sits at the intersection of these issues.

He is an environmentalist. He is an activist. He is scientifically literate. He challenges powerful economic interests. He questions conventional assumptions. He is also openly autistic. That combination makes him an unusually useful target for anyone wishing to portray those who challenge the existing order as unreasonable, extreme or simply different from supposedly normal people, and who should be ignored as a result.

I cannot know whether this explains what The Times is doing. Perhaps none of it does. But I think the question has to be asked because questioning Packham's autism potentially achieves something that has nothing to do with autism at all. It can undermine the messenger without ever engaging with the message. And if that is the consequence, whether intended or not, we should recognise what is happening.

Chris Packham's diagnosis tells us nothing about whether he is right about climate change. The evidence on climate change stands or falls on its own merits. If The Times, or anyone else, disagrees with what Packham says about the climate, biodiversity, fossil fuels or the environment, there is an obvious response available to them. They should challenge his arguments. But what they should not do is challenge who he is, or seek to undermine him, and others, by doing so. That is not just unethical, it provokes prejudice to support profit at cost to many.

We should not be surprised that profit is promoted at cost to many. That is what extractive capitalism does. That is not a flaw in its design. It is what it is designed to do. The well-being of millions and maybe billions of people have been sacrificed to that false god over decades and maybe centuries. But should Chris Packham be added to that list, to be discarded by being discredited because he asks awkward questions? I think not. And that is why this case matters.

It is about neurodiversity.

It is about prejudice.

It is about tolerance, understanding and acceptance.

But it is also about the right to free speech to point out the harm that some are choosing to impose on us when the evidence of that harm is so clear they must know what they are doing.

Chris Packham matters. But I do not think he will mind if I say he now represents an issue bigger than himself that also matters. And that is why I am addressing this abuse of him and am making this argument.

Chris Packham fights for life on earth. We all should. But there are those who want to silence him and all those who agree with him, autistic or not, and they will play dirty. They are, after all, used to that. It is up to us to fight back, for Chris, for all people who might be treated as “other”, and for our planet. Our future depends on us winning.