



Nanotech, Energy, and Snake Oil

Nanotech is still a media darling though it predates good old alchemy. Ancient red stained glass cathedral windows used nanogold. And we've been using nanocarbon in tires since the 1920s—and that's okay, but don't sell us old as new. Energy is back on the front burner, like in the 1970s, when we were shocked by the oil embargo energy crisis. And snake oil is that real or imagined cure-all elixir—a term applied to over-promised and under-delivered items. Do the three have anything in common?



Well, too many nanotech and energy “solutions” seem more like snake oil. And it's becoming increasingly difficult, even for technical people, to separate valuable ideas from snake oil substitutes. Dishonesty that goes far beyond hype hurts everyone, especially the honest entrepreneurs and researchers. Too many press releases describing nanotech and energy lie by exclusion—by leaving out the whole truth that would alert us to the oldness, or point out the showstopper.

Here are examples, using hypothetical cases to protect the guilty. “New Nano Blockbuster Breakthrough Delivers Disruptive Cosmetic Filler.” Wow! But you check and find out that such filler was manufactured at nanoscale for three decades and Egyptians used nanopigments in cosmetics. How about “Astonishing New Hydrogen Source Solves Storage Problem”? Just put this (old) alloy in water and “presto—instant hydrogen.” Hey, this is the old active metal hydrolysis trick learned in high school. Plenty of metals displace hydrogen from tap water—it's Chem 101. But here's the showstopper ignored by PR. These active metals only exist as ores—they all are produced by energy-intensive processes. The hydrogen from metal has terrible energy economics, and the metal winning process may use expensive grid electricity.

Let's get back to honest reporting of honest work. Today's very fast-paced, understaffed media can't hope to uncover the deception.

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Correction – In the July issue of *CircuitTree*, Figure 3 in Intelligent Design (pg. 29) was incorrect. Please see the correct figure online under our archives section at www.circuitree.com.