



A farmer's tractor plows a corn field. (photo: Darren Hauck/Reuters)

How the Biotech Industry Cultivates Positive Media - and Discourages Criticism

By Paul D. Thacker, The Progressive, 13 July 17

On April 2016, Monica Eng of WBEZ, Chicago's NPR station, published a [critical story](#) revealing that the agrichemical giant Monsanto had quietly paid a professor at the University of Illinois to travel, write, and speak about genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and even to lobby federal officials to halt further GMO regulation. In a grueling, year-long reporting project, Eng uncovered [documents](#) proving that Monsanto made the payments to University of Illinois professor Bruce Chassy, and that he [advised Monsanto](#) to deposit money in the university's foundation, where records are shielded from public disclosure.

"I knew that this would be a big story," Eng says.

What she didn't expect was the massive blowback: The university accused her of being an activist, not a journalist, and she was hounded by Twitter trolls who jumped on her story and waged a campaign to discredit her personally.

"I've worked as a professional journalist in Chicago for more than three decades," Eng says. "I've uncovered questionable activity in government groups, nonprofits, and private companies. But I don't think I have ever seen a group so intent on trying to personally attack the journalist covering the issue."

Eng's experience is just one example of a strategy first invented by Big Tobacco to smear critics, spin reporters, and tamp down information that could damage the industry's image.

In recent months, media outlets have reported on a disturbing trend of corporate-sponsored journalism. *The British Medical Journal* [exposed](#) a multiyear campaign by Coca-Cola to influence reporters covering obesity by secretly funding journalism conferences at the University of Colorado. The watchdog group Health News Review [reported](#) that two journalism professors at the University of Kansas asked more than 1,100 health-care reporters about their views on opioids in a survey that was funded, in part, by the [Center for Practical Bioethics](#), a group the [U.S. Senate Finance Committee investigated](#) for its ties to opioid manufacturers.

The biotech industry is particularly focused on taming controversies surrounding GMOs and the chemicals that are used on genetically modified crops, including Monsanto's weedkiller glyphosate. The [world's most widely used herbicide](#), glyphosate is critical for the successful cultivation of GMO corn and soybeans. A recent [study](#) found that the chemical's use by farmers has jumped fifteen-fold since 1996. The World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer has [identified](#) glyphosate as "probably carcinogenic to humans."

In January, a judge [overruled](#) Monsanto's objections, and the state of California will add a label with a [cancer warning](#) to the popular glyphosate-based weed killer RoundUp. The Inspector General for the Environmental Protection Agency just [announced](#) he is investigating whether a former high-ranking EPA official colluded with Monsanto. In addition to filing lawsuits and hiring lobbyists, the chemical industry is deploying industry-allied scientists and using pro-GMO websites to discredit journalists covering glyphosate and GMOs.

New York Times investigative reporter Danny Hakim has dealt with online abuse in recent months for writing [articles](#) critical of the agrichemical industry. Google Hakim's name and you find little mention of seventeen years at the *Times*, during which time he won a Pulitzer Prize. Instead, you'll find articles criticizing his reporting at sites like the American Council on Science and Health ("[Glyphosate: NYT's Danny Hakim Is Lying to You](#)") and the Genetic Literacy Project ("[Why Danny Hakim's New York Times GMO exposé misleads](#)").

"The industry's PR campaign to reframe the GMO debate and intimidate journalists through harassment and name-calling has been remarkably successful in my view," says food author and journalism professor Michael Pollan. "I think this is partly a function of the political and public relations naiveté of many of my fellow science writers."

One tactic industry allies employ to discredit questions about GMOs is to narrow the discussion to food safety. Pro-GMO scientists and writers [mock](#) experts and critics, by portraying them as loonies who think eating a bag of corn chips is akin to ingesting a bottle of arsenic. But this is a misleading line of attack, since GMO concerns are wide-ranging, including how well they are tested for safety, their [impact on agriculture](#) and the ecosystem, and the toxicity of glyphosate.

Most of all, there is legitimate debate about whether industry should be engineering a crop that requires the heavy use of pesticides. Industry and its allies attempt to discredit such questions by comparing GMO critics to climate denialists and vaccine safety denialists.

Hints of the biotech industry's media tactics have leaked from court cases filed against Monsanto alleging glyphosate causes cancer. Several filings reference internal Monsanto documents that describe

the company's social media strategy called "[Let Nothing Go](#)"—a program in which individuals who appear to have no connection to the industry rapidly respond to negative social media posts regarding Monsanto, GMOs, and agrichemicals.

[Lawyers in one case told a judge that](#) documents show Monsanto funnels money to the Genetic Literacy Project and the American Council on Science and Health in order to "shame scientists and highlight information helpful to Monsanto and other chemical producers."

Industry has also secretly funded a series of [conferences](#) to train scientists and journalists to frame the debate over GMOs and the toxicity of glyphosate. The most widely attended of these events happened in 2014 at the University of Florida and in 2015 at University of California-Davis. In emails, organizers referred to these conferences as biotech literacy bootcamps, and journalists are described as "partners." Organizers [included](#) the chairman of the horticultural sciences department at the University of Florida, Kevin Folta, the Genetic Literacy Project's Jon Entine, University of Illinois's Bruce Chassy, and consultant Cami Ryan.

While claiming to be "independent" of industry influence, Folta was [exposed](#) in *The New York Times* for taking money from Monsanto to promote GMOs. Shortly before the *Times* article reported on his connection to Monsanto, Folta's university [declared its intention](#) to donate these undisclosed payments to charity.

[Entine](#) was affiliated with a now-defunct group called STATS, which [promoted](#) positive messages about chemicals and [provided](#) communications support for tobacco companies. Last year, Entine wrote an article [attacking professors](#) at Columbia Journalism School for [their investigations](#) of ExxonMobil's involvement in climate change denial. Years ago, an [article in The New Yorker](#) reported on Entine's apparent involvement in the industry's coordinated condemnation of a professor at University of California-Berkeley, whose research is critical of pesticides.

Besides receiving money to help Monsanto, Chassy runs [Academics Review](#), a site suggested to him by [an executive at Monsanto](#) who emailed, "The key will be keeping Monsanto in the background so as not to harm the credibility of the information."

After helping plan the first conference, [Cami Ryan](#) later took a job with [Monsanto](#).

“These are distressing materials,” says Naomi Oreskes, professor of the history of science at Harvard University, after reviewing documents and emails about the conferences. Oreskes says the involvement of the American Council on Science and Health is especially problematic, given its long history of undermining the science on chemical safety and pesticides. She added: “It is clearly intended to persuade people that GMO crops are beneficial, needed, and not sufficiently risky to justify labeling.”

After early [discussions in 2013](#), Entine later [emailed](#) Folta, Chassy, and Ryan noting that the conferences needed to include people “strategically located” in key states where political battles over GMO foods were occurring. Entine [added](#) that once the program is figured out, “I’ll take on proposing the handful of journalists and media experts that we would hope to bring on board.”

When a journalist asked who was behind the 2015 conference at UC-Davis, Entine wrote that the biotech literacy events had university sponsorship, as well as support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the State Department, and Academics Review, which gets some industry support. In an [email](#) to several scientists, Chassy also claimed that universities and U.S. federal agencies were funding the literacy bootcamp conferences, and said the honoraria for presenters would be \$2,500. Chassy added, “Journalists aren’t inexpensive.”

But both the University of Florida and UC-Davis denied financially supporting these conferences. A spokesperson from the State Department said the agency merely sent a speaker to the 2014 conference at the University of Florida. After weeks of repeated requests, a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Agriculture was unable to find evidence of the federal agency’s financial support for the conferences.

So where did the cash come from? It’s a twisted money trail.

An [agreement](#) signed by Entine states that the literacy bootcamp at UC-Davis anticipated having many expenses paid by the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO). When contacted, BIO confirmed that it gave Academics Review \$175,000 for the 2014 conference at the University of Florida and \$165,000

for the 2015 conference at UC-Davis. But BIO added that the money was cycled through a nonprofit it operates called the Council on Biotechnology Information (CBI). In fact, the tax forms for CBI state that it gave a total of \$300,000 to Academics Review in both [2014](#) and [2015](#). And [tax forms](#) for Academics Review, which Chassy runs with his wife, note that the group spent more than \$160,000 on the UC-Davis conference in 2015.

In short, the only traceable money source is the biotech industry. So, what did industry money buy?

A flyer for the [2015 event at UC-Davis](#) lists more than a dozen faculty, including [Jay Byrne](#), a former public relations officer at Monsanto who now runs a PR firm that promotes GMOs. Also listed as faculty is Nina Fedoroff, a professor [at Penn State](#), who also serves as a [science adviser, and resident media critic](#), for a law firm that represents the biotech industry.

Among the attendees at the UC-Davis conference listed as “journalists” were Hank Campbell of the website Science 2.0, which regularly posts pro-GMO propaganda. Campbell is now president of the American Council on Science and Health, which [attacks](#) reporters for exposing scientists’ hidden ties to industry and the potential [dangers of pesticides](#).

After reviewing conference documents, Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University, said, “If journalists attend conferences that they are paid to attend, they need to be deeply suspicious from the get-go.” She added that the conference organizers were likely trying to convince journalists that anyone questioning the safety of GMOs “is anti-science and in the same category as climate change deniers.”

[Gary Schwitzer](#), who is the publisher of HealthNewsReview and an adjunct associate professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, is also concerned.

“Far too many journalists are sliding down the slippery slope of attending conferences that are sponsored by entities with financial interests,” he said. “This practice changes journalism [into] another form of pay-for-play.”

When asked about the funding for the bootcamps and the financial support from industry to his organization, Entine responded, “Sorry, I’ve never

heard of you. I don't respond to activists with no history of credible reporting."

Folta said he understands the conferences were funded by BIO and he organized the events outside of work hours. "All of my funding, as always, is and has been fully disclosed in accordance with university policy," he added.

In a statement to *The Progressive*, Monsanto wrote that the company collaborates with multiple organizations and provides financial support in a transparent manner to many industry organizations including CBI, of which the American Council on Science and Health is a supporting partner. Monsanto added that it does not provide funding to the Genetic Literacy Project, but ignored repeated questions about their financial support for the American Council on Science and Health.

Chassy did not respond to queries about funding for Academics Review and the biotech conferences. But he did join Entine and Folta in sending a letter to *The Progressive* accusing the author of unspecified "bias and harassment tactics" and "multiple false and potentially libelous insinuations and claims."

Gary Ruskin is codirector of [U.S. Right to Know](#), a nonprofit that works on transparency in the food industry and receives some [funding](#) from the [Organic Consumers Association](#). His group first got public records of industry-supported conferences. "Many reporters are simply too intimidated and afraid to report on the health and environmental effects of the agrichemical industry and its products," he says.

Industry tars public health advocates and reporters as anti-science for raising issues the public needs to understand. That should worry us all.