Michael Pollan, food activist and journalist, is the proverbial man trapped in the past in his latest piece for the New York Times, criticizing the Obama administration for not catering to his bizarre beliefs about how food production actually works, and along the way taking the opportunity to smear...me.

And you. And about 300 scientists and doctors who help us at the American Council on Science and Health for no other reason than that they care about educating the public. To accomplish that, they don't cave into the shrill beliefs of people who self-identify with Pollan's Idyllic notions about feeding the world.

Pollan's big complaint is not really with us, his bizarre assertion below is just an aside he tossed in there by way of humblebragging about how much he does for the "food movement." Maybe he has a "no fact checking" clause in his contract, so the editors have to let it slide, or they simply like his schtick - he has been on an ideological bender against pro-science groups for as long as he has been writing, after all. His chief complaint is with President Obama. He believed he was getting a "Farmer-in-Chief" - by which he means Organic Farmer - and instead of an activist who blames farmers for everything from global warming to obesity, the American public got someone who learned that feeding people is only easy when your farm is a computer keyboard and a high-walled garden in your yard. And that higher costs using inferior processes are invariably passed along to the poor.

In his latest alternate reality rant, Pollan tosses in (emphasis mine):
A spokesman for the American Council on Science and Health, a chemical-industry front group, called the Obamas “organic limousine liberals,” warning that organic farming would lead to famine and calling on the first lady to use pesticides in her garden — evidently whether she needed them or not.

He doesn't provide a source for that bit in quotes, but I can. It was on The Daily Show [2] in 2009, where in a segment with Samantha Bee a former employee said just that. I'm not defending it, partisan media outlets like to titter that The Daily Show is really clever and tricks people into looking foolish, but that isn't true, lots of groups prefer bad publicity to no publicity. I asked the one person from then who is still here about that appearance, and they knew exactly what was going to happen, but felt like the publicity was worth it. (1)

The part in bold is what sticks out to me. Pollan is trapped in the past in lots of ways so it's no surprise he would still contend that a fake news comedy bit from 2009, mixed in with his personal beliefs about our scientists and doctors, is a reason to smear the ethics of people he knows nothing about, but it's shoddy posturing and has no basis in reality. It's certainly not journalism, but I get that he is writing an op-ed and there was no critical thinking involved. He's written basically this same thing dozens of times so it flows easily.

Unlike Pollan, Our work is solely actioned by sound science and protection of the American consumer. End of story. What he wrote is libel, plain and simple and he knows he is a liar yet wrote it anyway, in order to exploit the credibility of the New York Times for his latest attempt at cyberbullying the science community. Yes, we get donations from the public and foundations and some companies, just like almost all non-profits, it makes no difference in our work.

His conspiracy theory about us is not just a lie, it also fails basic logic, because he is tainting groups he often lauds when they match his anti-science narrative. Last week, the Center for Science in the Public Interest was trumpeting a new paper about companies using supermarkets to manipulate people into buying particular foods [3]. They hired a writer to do the investigation. If funding mandates output, does Pollan believe that, because CSPI paid former New York Times journalist Gary Rivlin to do the research and write it, the result was pre-determined and Rivlin is a shill? American Heart Association gets corporate funding, are their papers written at the behest of the beef industry? United Way gets corporate funding, I could go on and on. I have a hard time finding a successful non-profit that doesn't get direct or indirect corporate funding - and yet Pollan doesn't libel Environmental Working Group or lots of others.

To a real journalist, the reason for his selective attacks is obvious; he doesn't attack anyone on his ideological side. We are pro-science when it comes to food and he is against it. Obviously all applied science is done by corporations so a pro-science group will indirectly help them, but so what? We have always stuck to our first principles, even when it was unpopular. Those first principles involve data. If something is harmful, we call it a health threat, like cigarettes. If it's not, it's a health scare, like BPA. That is why our donors give us money.

Pollan must know this, he is not an idiot, so maybe he is just grandstanding to sell books or get
another "consulting" gig from an organic trade group. He has never been to our office, he's never talked to anyone here, he is just demonizing "The Other" the same way some people demagogue on race or socioeconomic status or politics. He is simply making claims for emotional effect to appeal to his cultural followers, he knows they have no basis in fact. "Chemicals" are a scary word to a lot of people, thanks to activists who have made a great deal of money claiming their food process 'has no chemicals' or that a chemical found on an organic farm is somehow safe and anything else isn't.

We will take an unrestricted grant from a corporation, we have always been transparent about that. Compare that transparency to the hidden fundraising efforts of Environmental Working Group or Natural Resources Defense Council or Mother Jones, which published some stolen documents given to them by a fired employee a few years ago that have been rehashed over and over by the same circle of organic food zealots ever since. Ironically, Mother Jones has a separate foundation just to launder the 84% of its funding that can only be considered "dark money" from corporations - because it is absolutely from corporations. Why do you never see similar documents "leaked" about those organizations? They have a non-disclosure agreement as big as your head, that's why. They use transparency against pro-science organizations while carefully making sure to have as little of their own as possible. If any fired employee "leaked" those documents they would lose their house.

Again, Pollan knows this, yet he won't attack them for their lack of transparency. Apparently, to Pollan, you can only be a consumer advocate if you hate science, or scare the public ?for the sole purpose of creating lawsuits. Anyone else must be on the take.

I'm not on the take and I have all of the emails from my predecessor, who ran this organization for 34 years. She wasn't on the take either, she believed in the science behind everything she said or wrote.

Look, if there is a chemical company out there reading this, or that sees our name in the New York Times, and they want to fund us, by all means send a check. I will happily take an unrestricted grant from anyone who wants to send one. Ninety-nine percent of our donors are individuals, and I am proud of generous foundation support, but the one thing I have asked is why, when Organic Consumers Association and the giant corporations behind it fund over 300 different efforts to promote their beliefs about food (2), corporations in the applied science arena don't fund pro-science groups more.(3)

So if it happens, I'll cash that check, but there are no strings attached. And the scientists and doctors here don't even know who our grantors are, other than the occasional individual or foundation that stops in to say hello. I don't know how it was done in 1986 or whatever decade Pollan is stuck in, but that's how it is now.

One question that can't be answered is why he remains such a raging paranoid about scientists, so willing to regurgitate nonsense, when the anti-science side has $1 billion in annual revenue. I am not qualified to provide a psychiatric diagnosis but I recognize some people are just off-balance. They believe vaccines cause autism, that GMOs cause cancer, and that conventional food causes obesity. For those people, Pollan is an ideal mouthpiece, a journalist who only
accepts studies that match his confirmation bias and feed into his contempt for a science community which thinks little of him.\(\text{(4)}\) So maybe he needs to play along, even if he doesn't really believe it, to keep that money coming in.

He will object to such a breezy caricature of his ethics, unless he is clear-headed enough to see that is exactly what he does to science groups, for no other reason than that he ideologically opposes them.\(\text{(5)}\)

If more journalists stood up against Pollan, rather than being afraid to anger the New York Times, and analyzed issues critically, science acceptance among the public wouldn't be in the state it's in. But that is a topic for another time.

Until then, judge me on my consumer advocacy work, not what tiny fraction of our donations may come from any company, because Michael Pollan gets paid by a very large corporation, and he wouldn't like the implication that advertisers are dictating what he writes.

NOTES:

\(\text{(1)}\) The gent who was here then actually made a valid point, even though at the time I saw it as a harmless PR stunt by the White House and not worth making an issue about. A tiny 20-by-50-foot plot of land managed by government employees in order to be "organic" is not a way to feed the world, gushing about that process can only be done by well-heeled people, like food activists who leverage their New York Times presence for lots of speaking fees and consulting they pretend isn't corporate-funded.

However, I obviously believe that Democrats also need trusted guides on complex science issues, they sure won't get that from Greenpeace or Environmental Defense Fund, so I don't like words like "liberal." We are a 501c3 educational non-profit and have been for 38 years. We are not lobbyists nor, as Pollan, weirdly claims, are we some front group and no one but him has caught onto it since 1978. We only discuss politics when policy impacts science and health. Since I arrived to take over the Council, over monthly audience is up 1,300%. We're doing good things, as anyone can see. Even Michael Pollan, if he chose to look.

If, like Pollan, you are also trapped in the past, and think what one guy said one time is an eternal indictment of an organization, then the fact that Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund and Planned Parenthood were founded by eugenicists means you can never agree they have done anything positive since.

\(\text{(2)}\) This is just one. But the blowhard behind this organic food front, Gary Ruskin, prattles on endlessly that scientists are evil, stupid and unethical.
Well, they just don't. They have actual marketing groups, they have public relations groups, so independent, third-party science may be a waste of money. And I obviously can't call them, because if you call and ask for money, the awkward next question could be what will happen in return, and then I have to hang up on what might be a very nice individual. Organic farming, on the other hand, needs to pretend it is a grassroots, small-farm, ethical movement, so rather than having giant marketing departments that look corporate, they pay trade reps who do the dirty work advancing their agenda. And their money flows to scaremongers like US Right To Know and groups who pay Michael Pollan to consult or give talks.

Even magazines that are on his obvious side of the political aisle say he is unhinged [4]. But now Pollan has gone beyond what Berkeley Professor Mike Eisen called [5] "a new low even in Pollan's 'anti-GMO crusade'."

On Twitter, a journalist jumped to defend Pollan, asking me what our funding was and saying that they hesitated to use us as a source because they were unsure about our ethics also. Within minutes, I had another journalist emailing me and wondering if that journalist asked for the funding sources of groups with names containing "environmental" or "policy" or "consumer" in this story [6].
I bet not.