GMO Crops Attacked by Knowledge-Resistant NYT Journalist Danny Hakim

By Alex Berezow, PhD — October 31, 2016

Why America's supposed newspaper of record has become a voice for anti-biotechnology food activists remains a profound mystery. The only plausible explanation is that this is calculated; the New York Times must be tailoring its reportage to its customers, who consist mostly of well-to-do, organic-food-eating elites. Evidence plays little to no role in the paper's coverage of controversial scientific issues.

Michael Pollan serves as a case-in-point. In one of his most recent articles, he bashes modern agriculture and casually libels pro-biotech organizations (like ACSH) with whom he disagrees. Few journalists and even fewer scientists take him seriously. Yet, he is a regular contributor to the Times. Credentials and expertise apparently mean nothing to this once venerable institution.

Mr Pollan's tired drivel, however, is worthy of a Pulitzer Prize compared to an utterly appalling piece written by Danny Hakim. Of course, the usual knowledge-resistant suspects, like Mother Jones's Tom Philpott, praised the article for its "precision and clarity." In reality, as any reasonably literate person would know, the article is so full of distortions that an entire book could be written debunking it.

The gist of Mr Hakim's article is that GMOs have not lived up to their promise of higher yields or reduced pesticide use. He tortures cherry-picked data to reach that unsubstantiated conclusion. For instance, he largely restricts his analysis to the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe while ignoring the rest of the planet. That's a telling omission. Rich countries have excellent agricultural infrastructures and so have less to gain from GMOs than developing countries.

And that's precisely what research has shown. A meta-analysis of 147 research papers
published in *PLoS ONE* says that GMOs "reduced chemical pesticide use by 37%, increased crop yields by 22%, and increased farmer profits by 68%." It goes on to conclude, "Yield and profit gains are higher in developing countries than in developed countries."

In other words, this major study reaches the *exact opposite* conclusion of Mr. Hakim's article.

For a former economics correspondent, Mr Hakim also displays a troubling capacity to manipulate data. He implies that France, a country that rejects GMOs, uses less pesticide than the U.S. In an excellent *takedown* [6], Dr Andrew Kniss, an agroecology professor at the University of Wyoming, calls this analysis "borderline disingenuous." Not only did Mr Hakim fail to use the same units for comparison, a misleading tactic and a scientific taboo, but he also failed to account for the amount of farmland in each country. Dr Kniss properly reanalyzed the data and showed unequivocally that the U.S. uses far less pesticide per hectare than France (though he concludes that GMOs have little to do with that).

And, just for good measure, Mr Hakim goes on to compare agricultural pesticides to chemical weapons like Nazi-made sarin gas and cites ludicrous research that posits American children have lost 17 million IQ points because of pesticides.

Put bluntly, Mr. Hakim's article is a polished, well-crafted lie more suited for political propaganda posters than the pages of any newspaper. This epitome of journalistic malpractice ought to be retracted. Unfortunately, it won't be, and as with most pseudoscientific nonsense, responsible and scientifically literate journalists will be cleaning up this mess for years. Yet, somehow, the NYT saw this abomination as fit to print.

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