

Bees Shouldn't Become The Next 'Fake News' Victim



By Jon Entine — March 1, 2017



Hysteria courtesy of Organic Consumers Association

The line between deliberately manipulating a story or poorly reporting the facts is perilously thin, and often based on the subjectivity of the reader.

During Sunday's Academy Awards presentation, the United States' 'paper of record', the *New York Times*, [launched an advertising blitz positioning itself as the highbrow ethical responder to the spate of so-called 'fake news.'](#) [1] "The truth is hard...to find...to know," the add proclaimed, somberly.

It's a powerful message, one that the public and the media should reflect upon—including the leadership at the *Times* itself. That a journalist sometimes presents an incorrect story in good faith can be a matter of healthy debate. But increasingly, a more troubling ethical line is being crossed: some writers choose to arrange facts, or even invent them, in ways that grey out nuances to advance a story-line they arrived at before independent reporting even commenced. That leaves the editor as the public's final integrity life-line. But to fulfill that responsibility, editors need to be aware of their own biases and those of their journalists, or they risk crossing over from being guardians of the truth to creators of biased or even what has come to be popularly known as "fake news."

Case in point is the *New York Times*' coverage of food and farming issues, most recently what has come to be known in recent years as "beemageddon" and "beepocalypse" and various other terms— concerns about the health of one of nature's most important pollinators, the bee.

Are bees facing extinction as most environmental advocacy groups and even a few scientists

claim? And are neonicotinoid pesticides the key reason behind their health problems, as many activists, and the *Times*, suggest?

***Times'* Michael Pollan on presenting only one side of complex issues**

To the science community, food and modern farming coverage has not been the *Times'* strong point. Journalist and foodie Michael Pollan's articles on the virtues of organic food and the dangers of 'industrialized agriculture' have been a *Times'* staple since the early 2000s. In 2013, he [bragged in a video interview](#) [2] with a fellow activist that he long has exploited the willingness of his editors to forego traditional vetting because they share his reflexive anti-industry perspective:

The media has really been on our side for the most part. I know this from writing for the New York Times.... [W]hen I wrote about food I never had to give equal time to the other side. I could say whatever I thought and offer my own conclusions. Say you should buy grass feed beef and organic is better, and these editors in New York didn't realize there is anyone who disagrees with that point of view. So, I felt like I got a free ride for a long time.

It's startling that a reputable journalist would boast about manipulating editors who shared a reflexively and uncritical anti-industry—and in this case, an anti-science—world view. Pollan went on to bemoan that because of pushback from the science community, he now finds it increasingly difficult to present only his biased side of the story:

There is something called the Food Dialogues presented in various places to talk about how food is produced and greater transparency. ... So, I think they have kind of spooked the newspapers into realizing they need to give equal time on this issue and it is an issue with two sides.

Two recent *Times* articles on the swirling farm controversy about bee health and food—one two years ago and another last week—raise serious questions about whether the paper's editors are still wearing ideological blinders on stories involving 'villainous' agri-businesses.

In 1994, the *Times* wrote an editorial about "The Bee Crisis," in which it noted an alarming 50% crash in feral bees in New York State. It blamed that primarily on broad spectrum [pesticides](#) [3]. The next year, the phase out began of the most common pesticides—pyrethroids and organophosphates—used to protect crops pollinated by bees. While effective, these chemicals were known to sometimes kill beneficial insects and pose human health hazards.

They were replaced by what then and now were considered by most entomologists to be a far safer alternative—neonicotinoids, a class of targeted insecticides whose introduction in the mid 1990s coincided with a stabilization of the global bee population. While sometimes sprayed for particular fruit, vegetable or landscape applications, the most overwhelmingly prevalent use of neonics is as a coating for seeds, which then grow into plants that systemically fight pests

The bee health and pesticide issue faded from the headlines until the winter of 2006-7, when some US beekeepers began discovering that many of their bees had mysteriously abandoned their colonies. The bees left behind the queen bee, attended by too few, immature worker bees to

sustain the colony, yet with ample viable brood and stored food. They came up with a new name for a bizarre phenomenon that had been observed for hundreds of years; Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD).

CCD is a periodic but still inexplicable ecological phenomenon that's been around since at least the 1800s, predating the modern, post-World War II use of synthetic pesticides, says University of Maryland entomologist Dennis vanEngelsdorp, who along with agricultural department researcher Jeff Pettis coined the term a decade ago. vanEngelsdorp, now head of the Bee Informed Partnership, [has told me](#) [4] and [other reporters](#) [5], repeatedly, that there have been no instances of CCD over the past five years except cases linked to the Nosema fungus.

Michael Wines frames the 'neonic' crisis to promote a beepocalypse myth?

In 2015, Michael Wine reported, appropriately, on rising concerns about ongoing bee health issues, but he incorrectly claimed they were an extension of the long-since passed CCD phenomenon. He compounded this misreporting by playing up what has become known as the beepocalypse myth thesis, writing that “some experts have focused on neonicotinoids” as the driving culprit.

It wasn't his first time manufacturing otherwise unconnected links. [In 2013](#) [6], Wines reported on rising concerns about ongoing bee health issues—an issue he had been highlighting in increasingly alarming opinion-filled stories. His theme, hammered home in numerous reports, [such as this](#) [7], fingered one culprit above all others: pesticides, particularly neonics. In what amounts to an editorial, Wines headlined the story: “Research Suggests Pesticide Is Alluring and Harmful to Bees.” His sources beyond two highly contested studies?—unidentified “other experts,” whose views stood in contrast to well-established researchers and the overwhelming majority of mainstream entomologists who see the issue as complex, with pesticides playing a real but relatively minor role in bee health issues.

Wines was back at it again later in 2015 after a temporary increase in over summer honey bee deaths. [In](#) [8] [this story](#) [8], he incorrectly wrote that they were an extension of the long-since passed CCD phenomenon. He compounded this misreporting by playing up what has become known as the beepocalypse myth thesis, again editorializing that “some experts have focused on neonicotinoids” as the driving culprit.



[9]

Researchers from Oregon State University testing bees last August for the effects of pesticides. via NYTimes

So, who were these mysterious “experts” who appear like clockwork in his pieces that Wines claimed pointed to neonics as the Darth Vader of the bee world? Wines again never tells us. That’s particularly odd, and even more odd is that he appears not to have consulted the primary source for the rest of his story, Dennis vanEngelsdorp.

If he had, he would have found that the University of Maryland entomologist doesn’t believe neonics are driving current bee health problems. They are way down the list of likely



[10]causes, he’s said, with number one being the

[Varroa mites](#) [11] that feed on the bodily fluids of bees.

Varroa mites first became known as a problem in the US in the 1980s and began infesting beehives in California in 1993. That crisis stabilized after the introduction of neonics later in the 1990s, then spiked with CCD, with only sporadic issues since.

On average, about 10 to 15 percent of honey bees die each winter. In recent years, that percentage jumped to as high as 35 percent before dropping down to levels in the low 20s. There was a more recent rise in bee deaths during the summer, normally a period of hive replenishment, that has everyone spooked. Highly charged words like “[beepocalypse](#) [12]” or “[beemageddon](#) [13]” are now everywhere on the Internet. But what was causing the die-offs?

Like the fictional parents in the edgy comedy show *South Park* who blame Canada for all their woes, activists often coalesce around an issue and then come up with a simplistic narrative to frame it. Strident opponents of modern agricultural technology initially [blamed GMOs](#) ^[14] for bee deaths and when that meme didn't get traction, their campaign focus switched to neonics.

But mainstream entomologists never gave that any credence. Noting the complexity of the emerging controversy, the US Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency have taken a cautious, science-based approach, producing a [broad-based assessment](#) ^[15] of the evidence. The independent researchers [concluded](#) ^[16] that bees are facing unique stressors but neonics, and pesticides in general, were unlikely to be the major drivers of bee deaths.

Along with *Varroa*, the blue ribbon panel pointed to *Nosema*, a common parasite that invades their intestinal tracts and the use and perhaps misuse of miticides to control them; climate change; lack of genetic diversity in the bee population; loss of habitat; and an often-unmentioned factor that many entomologists believe may be the key factor—the stress put on bees by large commercial beekeepers, particularly to service the agri-business demand for bees needed for the California almond crop in late winter before bees normally repopulate.

Times' Stephanie Strom: Bee health perpetrator profiled as victim?

While Wines never named the “some experts” who support the claim that neonics are at the center of the bee health issue, fellow Times reporter Stephanie Strom found two with that view. Her front business page story, [“A Bee Mogul Confronts the Crisis in His Field](#) ^[17],” on February 29, sympathetically profiled two of the country's largest industrial bee moguls, Bret and Kelvin Adee.

Like the Wines' story, Strom's article shows no signs of intentional bias. I've long been a fan of both of their journalism on other topics, and I know Strom, who I've talked to on multiple occasions, is dedicated to reporting on complex issues fairly. But she botched this story. Most notably, the piece is infused with the popular activist-driven belief, rejected as simplistic by top entomologists, that neonics is the common thread linking the 2006-7 CCD crisis to current bee health issues.

Strom cites the European Commission's 2013 decision to ban neonics, and tees up Bret Adee to defend it:

“The more you study it, the more obvious it becomes: the relationship between the pesticides that have been sprayed everywhere over the last 10 years and what's happening to bees,” she quotes Adee as saying.

Strom doesn't mention that the ban was passed over the [objections of many scientists](#) [18]. It's led to new costs and pest pressures; a [sharp increase in the use of the dangerous chemicals](#) [19] phased out years ago, pyrethroids and organophosphates, and lower farm yields. She neglects to mention that European courts have issued rulings challenging the science behind the ban, and moves are underway [to overturn it](#). [20]

Here is the Orwellian twist: Large-scale bee keepers like the Adees, who mobilize their pollinator hordes as traveling livestock, especially as amateur beekeeping has become a fad due to claims about bees dying off, are widely viewed by entomologists as a key driver of bee health problems, yet they are profiled by the New York Times a credible source for diagnosing bee health—and as victims?

Strom sees no irony in this. And she apparently does not know enough about how pesticides are used to pick up on the fact that Adee's comments undermine the contention that spraying neonics is at the root of bee health problems.

Neonics are primarily applied as seed treatments—not sprayed—and can only come into contact with bees through dust drift (an initially unanticipated complication now being increasingly effectively controlled) and residues in plant nectar and pollen, which have been consistently shown (and recently confirmed by EPA) to be well below thresholds that could harm bees even near large-scale grain crops.

Strom and the Times also never mention that her “crisis in the California fields” reversed itself, at least for this winter. The Adees are having a pretty good year—bee deaths are down dramatically from the winter before. That inconvenient fact is all but missing from the story, and is not reflected in the ‘crisis’ headline. More than likely, Strom and the *Times* had formulated their narrative—bees and beekeepers in California almond fields are in crisis—and then did not adjust when the facts on the ground contradicted it.

Are bees facing a neonic-caused global health crisis?

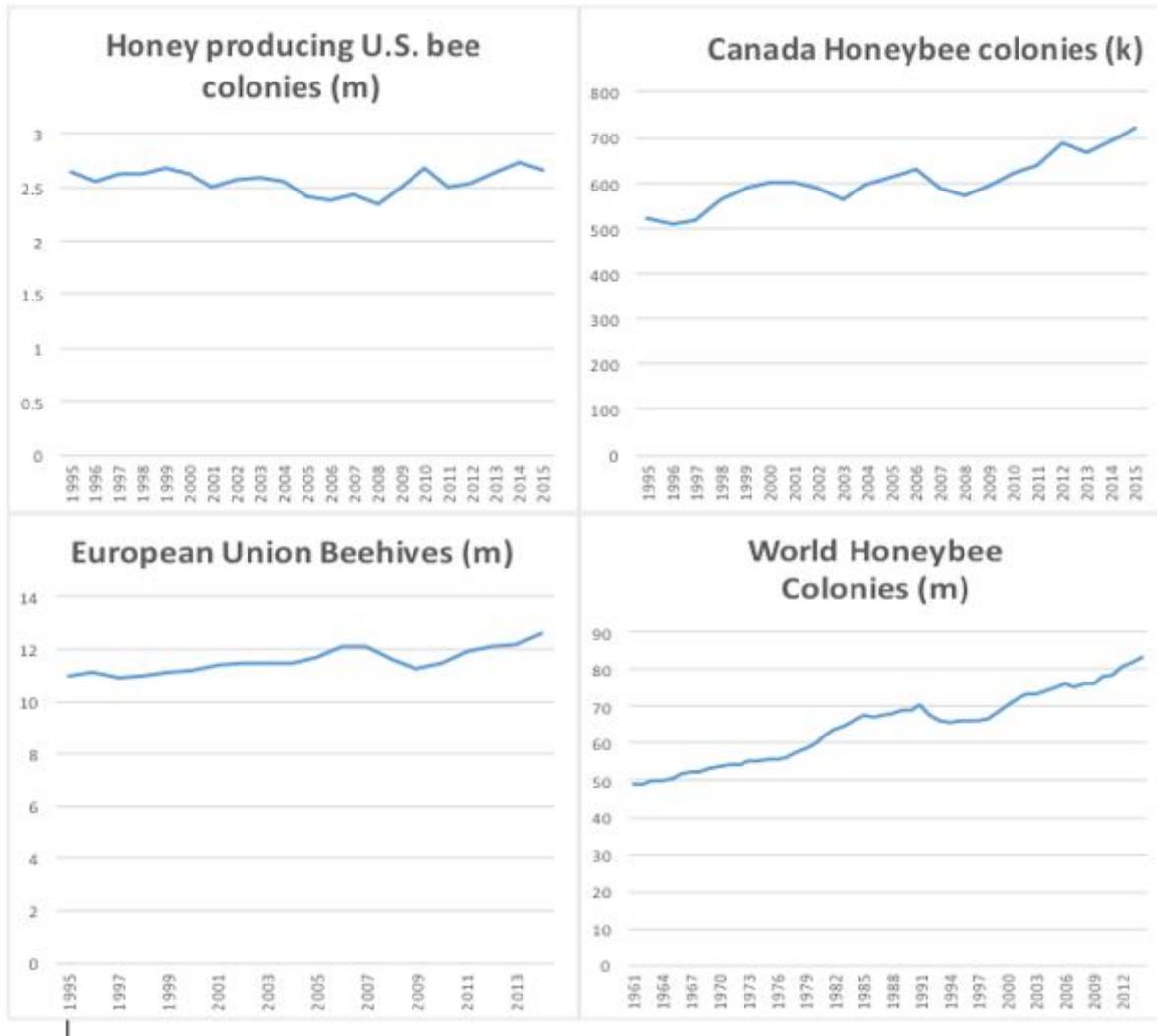
There are other strange turns in the Strom account, most notably her central thesis that bees and beekeepers are in the midst of an escalating catastrophic crisis, with neonics at its center. Bee health is a serious issue. Everyone is perplexed about mysterious variations in summer bee deaths. Wild bees are also being monitored, but there is no way to monitor their overall health and there are no signs of a crisis.

Moreover, neonics and pesticides in general rank near the bottom of the list as potential challenges facing bees, according to vanEngelsdorp, Pettis, University of Illinois entomologist Mae Berenbaum and other top scientists. In one of many such surveys, the USDA-funded [New York Bee Wellness](#) ^[21] non-profit polled its members last fall as to what they saw as [causing bee health problems](#) ^[22]. Varroa mite was the major culprit, with 42.6%. That was followed by small hive beetles (26.8%); queen failure (24.9%); as moth (19.2%); and deformed wing virus (6.9%). Pesticides? Less than 1% (0.6% to be exact).

“If we took pesticides out of the equation tomorrow, I think there’s no doubt we would have reduced colony losses,” vanEngelsdorp told me. “But even without pesticides, we’d still be seeing significant losses—losses that are unsustainable.”

Their conclusions are underscored by more than 20 field analyses and studies of neonic usage, [recently posted](#) ^[23] on the Genetic Literacy Project, which as a whole find no evidence that neonics are a major bee health concern.

Taking the big picture view, North American, European and global bee hive numbers have risen steadily since the introduction of neonics, to record levels. Outside of a few states in the United States (most notably California) and sections of some countries in Europe, there is no crisis. And in places where neonic usage is highest—western Canada and Australia—bee health has never been better. Here are the number of bee colonies in key regions since the introduction of neonics in 1995:



What will The Times do?

When it comes to corraling support, activist environmentalists often focus on simple villains and frame issues in catastrophic terms. From Greenpeace's campaign to force Shell to deep six the Brent Spar North Sea oil platform in the 1990s to the efforts by the Natural Resources Defense Council to replace harmless BPA in plastics with substitutes that may be harmful (BPS) to the ongoing but misplaced hysteria against DDT that the World Health Organization has said may have cost a billion lives, the 'simple' enemy-of-the-people target is sometimes benign, and its banning or removal often leads to far worse consequences.

The world's top scientists cringe at the hyperbolic framing of environmental issues. When it comes to bees, National Medal of Science and Goldman Environmental Prize winning bee expert May Berenbaum has [called such scare claims unhelpful](#) [24]. "The rhetoric has gotten ridiculous. It is hyperbolic to talk about the apocalypse," she said.

Faced with a slew of missteps in its coverage of the “beeapocalypse”, the Times might be well served to reflect on its neonics and bee crisis narrative. Next up for its editors: reporter Danny Hakim, who has faced [sharp criticism from independent scientists](#) [25] for his [reporting](#) [26] on the GMO debate, is taking on the bees and pesticides. The [Times was unresponsive](#) [27] when scientists and science journalists challenged his prior reporting as biased (and in some cases factually inaccurate).

Is the Times willing to devote the time and resources to report on nuanced stories outside of its traditional fields of expertise? That would require a level of oversight at the vetting stage and after an article is written but before publication—which now appears to be lacking, at least on the issue of pollinators and pesticides.

Bees shouldn't become the next 'fake news' victim.

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Links

- [1] <https://youtu.be/gY0FdZ350GE>
- [2] <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2013/10/22/michael-pollan-brags-about-twisting-facts-to-support-anti-gmo-activism-and-duping-credulous-new-york-times/>
- [3] <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/08/14/magazine/sunday-august-14-1994-the-bee-crisis.html>
- [4] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jon-entine/post_8761_b_6323626.html
- [5] <https://www.wired.com/2016/08/jerry-hayes-how-to-save-the-bees-monsanto/>
- [6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/science/earth/soaring-bee-deaths-in-2012-sound-alarm-on-malady.html>
- [7] https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/23/us/research-suggests-pesticide-is-alluring-and-harmful-to-bees.html?_r=0
- [8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/us/honeybees-mysterious-die-off-appears-to-worsen.html>
- [9] <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2017/03/01/bias-new-york-times-truth-hard-reporting-bees-neoncotinoid-pesticides/14bees1-master1050/>
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- [11] <http://www.beeologics.com/colony-health/colony-collapse-disorder/>
- [12] <http://science.time.com/2013/05/07/beeapocalypse-redux-honey-bees-are-still-dying-and-we-still-dont-know-why/>
- [13] <http://qz.com/81558/america-is-one-bad-winter-away-from-a-food-disaster-thanks-to-dying-bees/>
- [14] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/death-of-the-bees-genetically-modified-crops-and-the-decline-of-bee-colonies-in-north-america/25950>
- [15] <https://www.usda.gov/documents/ReportHoneyBeeHealth.pdf>
- [16] <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdamediafb?contentid=2013/05/0086.xml&printable=true>
- [17] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/business/a-bee-mogul-confronts-the-crisis-in-his-field.html>
- [18] <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2014/06/06/there-is-no-bee-armed-doom-misguided-neonics-ban-threatens-honeybees-and-farming/>
- [19] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-bees-are-safenow-lift-this-pesticide-ban-1437594547>

- [20] <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2017/02/17/bee-pocalypse-myth-faces-rebuke-europe-appears-poised-overturn-neonicotinoid-pesticides-ban/>
- [21] <http://nybeewellness.org/ny-bee-wellness-fall-survey-2016-results/>
- [22] <http://us5.campaign-archive2.com/?u=84212338dd107852d694d9b24&id=6d1553a633>
- [23] <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2017/02/06/gold-standard-assessing-neonicotinoids-field-bee-hive-studies-find-pesticides-not-major-source-of-health-issues/>
- [24] <http://triblive.com/news/editorspicks/4662633-74/pesticides-lomborg-bee>
- [25] <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2016/11/03/npr-ny-times-danny-hakim-fire-scientist-farmer-critics-gmos-failing-report/>
- [26] <https://itif.org/publications/2016/11/09/fact-checking-new-york-times-genetically-modified-crop-yields>
- [27] <https://www.geneticliteracyproject.org/2016/12/08/new-york-times-unresponsive-scientists-criticism-danny-hakims-error-filled-article-gmo-failures/>
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