

SourceWatch: A Website for Conspiracy Theorists Run by Lawyer Lisa Graves



By Alex Berezow, PhD — April 6, 2017



A SourceWatch meeting. (Credit: Shutterstock) ^[1]

Today, it seems that honest disagreement just isn't possible. Social media, which has become a sewage pipe of political hyper-partisanship and unscientific propaganda, magnifies this disturbing trend. If two otherwise intelligent people disagree on something, accusations of being a liar, fraud, or paid shill are quick to follow.

Compounding this problem is the fact that [half of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory](#) ^[2]. Instead of ushering in a Second Enlightenment, it appears the Information Age has turned us into paranoid cynics who perceive dark forces controlling world events. Such is the state of our culture in 2017.

Taking advantage of this toxic mindset are websites like SourceWatch, a site that receives a lot of "[dark money](#)" ^[3] (i.e., money given through industry-connected foundations so it can hypocritically accuse others of taking corporate money). The website is like a politicized, unscientific version of Wikipedia; volunteers, rather than qualified experts, write smear articles about people they don't like. According to it, we are a part of the grand pharma/chemical/agriculture conspiracy that is poisoning America.

The Center for Media and Democracy



The Weird World of SourceWatch

A look at the site's bizarre logo gives an insight into how they think. The logo implies that companies like Monsanto and BP are secretly controlling Fox News. How realistic is that?

It's not at all. In 2015, Fox News brought in about [\\$2.3 billion in revenues](#) [4], which nearly doubled CNN's revenues and more than quadrupled MSNBC's. Fox isn't hurting for cash, [despite Bill O'Reilly's best efforts](#) [5].

SourceWatch Knows How Fundraising Works

SourceWatch, which certainly knows how to raise money², lies about how fundraising works.

First, it peddles the notion that their fundraising is holy and righteous, while the fundraising of others is dirty and contaminated. Second, SourceWatch perpetuates the myth that the groups it disagrees with, like ACSH, alter their opinions and distort facts in order to raise money from industry. In reality, it's the exact opposite. *Fundraisers raise money from people who already agree with the mission of the group.*

Churches raise money from believers, charities raise money from humanitarians, Republicans raise money from conservatives, Democrats raise money from liberals -- and The Center for Media and Democracy (which publishes SourceWatch) raises money from anti-technology, anti-corporate activists.

SourceWatch Activists Don't Understand Science

Reading through the website, one thing becomes immediately clear: The volunteer bloggers know absolutely nothing about science. Articles that are strictly about scientific topics, such as biotechnology and glyphosate, are appallingly lopsided, poorly sourced, and embarrassingly out-of-date. And as a [clever Redditor pointed out](#) [6], a person who serves on the [policy board of the Organic Consumers Association](#) [7], which provides the corporate funding for the US Right To

Know anti-GMO group that promotes SourceWatch as well, helped write the article on Monsanto, which makes GMOs. That's strange, given SourceWatch's ostensible concern for conflicts of interest.

Unsurprisingly, SourceWatch is an arm of the left-wing, anti-corporate "watchdog" group Center for Media and Democracy. The executive director, [Lisa Graves](#) [8], is a former Clinton administration lawyer with no scientific training who once worked for progressive Sen. Patrick Leahy. Her partisan credentials are impeccable.

That's why all she ever talks about is money. In what has to be a pathological case of projection, Ms. Graves just assumes that money corrupts scientists the same way it corrupts her friends in politics. She doesn't understand that scientists, like our team at ACSH, know that good science is good science, regardless if it was paid for by academia or industry. Honest (or dishonest) people can work for both. The only thing that matters is the quality of the scientific work.

But lawyers and anti-science activists don't think like that. Because they are untrained, they are incapable of analyzing the science, so they do the only thing they know how to do: Make baseless accusations against others and engage in the *argumentum ad aurum* [9] fallacy. And this time-tested methodology of libeling industry scientists works quite well; [even NYU "journalists" do it](#) [10].

Here is a typical passage on SourceWatch about ACSH:

Numerous ACSH publications (that do not disclose the corporations that have funded the organization) take positions attacking public concerns about various corporate products and practices, such as genetically modified foods (GMOs), pesticides, herbicides, and more, and have sought to downplay concerns raised by scientists and consumers.

This sentence is singularly impressive for its ability to cram so many false assumptions and half-truths into such a small space.

All non-profits maintain donor anonymity. Confidentiality is considered a [crucial part of ethical fundraising](#) [11]. Not only does Ms. Graves engage in the exact same behavior, she is also accusing others of acting ethically. That's an incredibly odd argument to be making.

All pro-science groups, including ACSH, wholeheartedly support GMOs and pesticides, regardless of who the donors are. The reason is because the scientific consensus on GMOs is abundantly clear: They are safe and effective. Similarly, when used at levels deemed safe by the EPA, pesticides are also safe and effective.

SourceWatch: A Website for Conspiracy Theorists

The bottom line is that SourceWatch is precisely what you would expect for a website that is operated by partisan political activists: It is completely science-free and obsessed with money. If we lived 300 years ago, SourceWatch would be warning us about the Illuminati.

Notes

(1) Sorry, I refuse to link to this.

(2) The Center for Media and Democracy had a [\\$1 million budget in 2014](#) [12].

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/04/06/sourcewatch-website-conspiracy-theorists-run-lawyer-lisa-graves-11093>

Links

[1] <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/mysterious-man-making-silence-gesture-while-349474982>

[2] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/19/fifty-percent-of-americans-believe-in-some-conspiracy-theory-heres-why/>

[3]

http://www.science20.com/science_20/dark_money_funded_site_prwatch_says_scientists_are_fronts_for_corporations-172406

[4] <http://www.journalism.org/2016/06/15/cable-news-fact-sheet/>

[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/04/business/media/sexual-harassment-bill-oreilly-fox.html>

[6]

https://www.reddit.com/r/skeptic/comments/2b2qdi/is_source_watch_reliable/cj1o9dw/?st=j15r1yay&sh=5c58607c

[7] <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/jill-richardson>

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lisa_Graves

[9] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/09/08/argumentum-ad-aurum-follow-money-fallacy-10133>

[10] <http://acsh.org/news/2017/03/24/new-york-university-journalism-academics-stop-libeling-scientists-and-doctors-11032>

[11] <https://www.afpnet.org/ethics/enforcementDetail.cfm?ItemNumber=3359>

[12] <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/391777402>